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The Unanswered Questions

A study of the undetermined or indeterminable theses
 Theme: Asking the right questions, that's the answer
 by Piya Tan ©2001, 2006, 2012

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1 The 4 types of questions

1.1 ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. Religion often deals with the fundamental questions of life: what is life? what are we? where does this universe come from? and so on. Early Buddhism is unique in insisting that we ask not merely ask any questions—many of which are purely speculative, frivolous or simply loaded—but we must ask the *right* questions. In asking the right questions, we will arrive at the right answers, and so attain salvation.

Wrong questions arise from wrong views, and lead to more views, until it becomes a jungle of views. The right questions focus our search for answers, and reduce or transform views into truths, leading to a direct vision into true reality. Understanding true reality frees us from ignorance and craving (which bring about suffering), so that we are liberated from suffering.

1.2 DISPUTED QUESTIONS. In this essay, our study will centre around the philosophical tetralemma (the four points) (Skt *catuskoṭi*) and the “ten unanswered questions” (*avyākata*). The significance of these topics has today captured the interest of even non-Buddhist specialists. The British philosopher and theologian, **John Hick** (1922-2012),¹ for example, discusses these topics in his *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale Univ Press, 1993), which has inspired this essay. [9]

There is a continuing tendency amongst those interested in religious dialogue to agree on a common list of doctrines or truths that we all can agree on. This is no easy task but with growing openness in dialogue, some insightful meeting points can be found, especially as the world becomes more open and connected through free learning and information technology.

1.3 THE NECESSITY OF QUESTIONING. Religion begins with basic questions that we ask. Those religions that forge their answers into dogmas (fixed unchallengeable tenets) simply degenerate into fundamentalist and intolerable, unhelpful even to themselves spiritually. Indeed, we could even say that any organized religion must base itself on such tenets. An organized religion is like a religious empire: it must have an emperor, a centre of power, a code of inviolable laws, and loyal citizens. Its main weakness is that it is power-based and builds on numbers.

Spirituality, on the other hand, arises from a constant questioning within ourselves. We go on asking ourselves basic questions until there is no more question to ask. The answer is where all such questioning

¹ **John Hick** was born into a fundamentalist Christian family in Yorkshire, England. After World War 2, he was attracted to Immanuel Kant’s philosophy and began to question his Christian fundamentalism. He completed his DPhil in Oxford Univ (1950) and a D Litt in Edinburgh (1975). After many years as a member of the United Reformed Church, he joined the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). He visited Sri Lanka to study Buddhism. During his time at Claremont Graduate Univ (1977-1992), Hick’s religious pluralism took a less theistic turn, due mostly to his interaction with Buddhist philosophers in the US and Japan, incl his Claremont colleague, Masao Abe. In 2011, the Univ of Birmingham launched the John Hick Centre for Philosophy of Religion. See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/hick/>.

ultimately points to. To question reflects a desire to know and see for ourselves what is really out there. The answer comes when we begin to directly see the true reality that is outside of us to be also within ourselves. As without so within, as within so without.

To be truly spiritual is to be a person of the spirit, one who learns to see the spirit of the matter, who looks deep through surfaces and beyond words. The word is never the thing—because there is no *thing* in the first place, only processes that move on the moment we notice them.

Spirituality begins with our weeding out the wrong and unhelpful questions, the loaded questions with preset answers. Who is God? Who created the world? What is the soul? Why do we suffer? How do we go to heaven? These are questions that assume their answers that are meant to limit, even stop, questioning. The “who” tag assumes an entity name (*who* gives these names, anyway?). “What” often points to something fixed and concrete. “Why” seeks to understand conditions—not a single cause—but the inter-relationship of causes and effects. “How” is the learning to question rightly and so becomes the way out of the predicament.

1.4 ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. The right questions are those pregnant with their own answers. The best questions question the basics of life. In Buddhism, the basic questions are those inseparably linked with the four noble truths.

(1) **The first noble truth** is that suffering or unsatisfactoriness exists. Our suffering is defined by our seeing ourselves and the world as *what*, *when* and *who*. We are caught up with the question, “**What** is that?” (we see people, beings and events as entities or things), inciting desires to *have* them, and *collect* more of them, when we see them as pleasurable; to reject what we see as unpleasant; and to ignore what we do not understand.

We are plagued by the questions of **when**, seeing things as having a past, a future, but often ignoring the present, *when* all things really are. When we see how the present creates the past, and dreams out the future, then we know that *when* is merely a forgetting, an excuse, for not looking at the *now* and learning from it.

When we ask **who**, we are seeing people, beings and things as fixed and unchanging entities. We take people to be looks, names, smells, tastes, and touches, as objects of our senses. To merely see people as *who* is to limit their true reality and goodness to names, titles, status, wealth, power and worldliness.

Psychologically, we see ourselves as “I” measured against “others” as being *better* than, or “I” (views), “me” (conceit) and “mine” (craving). These are **the 3 grasplings** (*ti, gaha*) of craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna*) and views (*diṭṭhi*), on account of which arise, respectively, the notions “this is mine,” “this I am,” and “this is my self”.²

The reality is that we only experience changing *forms*, which stimulate our *feelings*, conditioned by our *perception* of the past. If we apprehend and evaluate such experiences as being pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, we are merely conjuring *mental formations*, virtual realities in *consciousness*. These are called the five aggregates, which are all that we really are.³

(2) **The second noble truth** is that suffering arises from craving. Craving (*taṇhā*) is a self-induced *thirst* or perceived *lack* on account of measuring ourselves against others, comparing what we do not *have* with what *others* have. These measurements and comparisons are the results of seeing ourselves and others in terms of *what*, *when* and *who*.

² See **Vatthūpama S** (M 7.18/1:38), SD 28.12. See foll n on the 3 grasplings.

³ The “the 3 grasplings” (*ti, vidha gāha*)—*etaṃ mama, eso ‘ham asmi, eso me attā ti*—are those of views (*diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), of conceit (*māna*) (MA 2:111, 225). The notion “This is mine” arises through craving (*taṇhā*); the notion “This I am” arises through conceit (*māna*); the notion “This is my self” arises through views (*diṭṭhi*). These 3 considerations represent respectively the 3 kinds of mental proliferation (*papañca*) of self-view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), and of conceit (*māna*) (Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f): see **I: The nature of identity** (SD 19.1), **Me: The nature of conceit** (SD 19.2a) & **Mine: The nature of craving** (SD 19.3). The opp formula, *n’etaṃ mama, n’eso ‘ham asmi, na mēso attā ti*, is applied to the 5 aggregates (eg **Anatta, lakkhaṇa S**, S 22.59.12-16/3:68 = SD 1.2). See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:32 f.

On the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k, khandha*), see **Dve Khandha S** (S 22.48/3:47 f), SD 17.1a.

When we measure and compare ourselves against others, we often perceive only lack, no matter how rich, famous, powerful, beautiful or religious we are or think we are. Perceiving these self-induced lacks, we go on to ask *why* we have such lacks, and we want what we see as desirable in others. On the other hand, if we perceive ourselves as *having* more than others, we insist on some “fair exchange” for our gifts or kindness: “If I help you what can you do for me?” This is not really kindness, but a business deal.

Perceiving such discrepancies in our lives, if we see ourselves as “lackers,” we then ask *why*, that is, why do I lack this or that? Not finding any satisfactory answer in such wrong questions, we go on to ask *how*, that is, how do I get what I do not have? We tend to think that we *are* what we *have*, and when we perceive ourselves as *not* having, we feel as if we are *nothing*: we are full of doubts.⁴

We perceive “nothing” as if it were bad or evil⁵ in itself, not understanding that we tend to give our own meanings to the words that we use. The point is that to be really nothing (*ākiñcana*), we must first be “something,” that is, to cultivate our body and speech for the benefit of mental cultivation, both of which serve as the fertile ground for liberating insight. Then, we are truly “nothing” (*akiñcana*), in the sense that we are troubled by nothing.⁶

(3) **The third noble truth** is the way out of suffering and unsatisfactoriness, that is, a stress-free and death-free “state,” nirvana. There is no suffering here because there is no “who” to think in terms of “what” or “when.” If there is no suffering, there is also no “why” and “how.” As such, in a manner of speaking, this is where there is no who, what, where, when and why. For, it is unconditioned, with neither causes nor effects, and no questions to bother us.

The grammar of suffering does not apply here, where no thinking arises, where there is only the bliss of stillness. The fire has burnt itself out and is extinguished. Yet, it has gone nowhere: it neither is nor is not. The conditions that support it are no more there.

(4) **The fourth noble truth** is the way out of suffering, the path to nirvana. This is the “how” in a true and good sense of the word, because it involves self-effort, self-understanding, and self-awakening. Self-effort means understanding that all goodness begins with us, by cultivating our body and speech. When we respect our body and speech, we are to that extent happy, and able to harmonize with others.

This promotes self-understanding by way seeing directly into our minds and hearts, and truly seeing ourselves just as we are and the good we are capable of. Inner joy and peace arise from this understanding because we are now experiencing ourselves on a higher, non-physical, level, as pure mind, where our genius and goodness are born.

If we have made such a self-effort and gained such a self-understanding, insight wisdom arises in us so that we can directly see into true reality, things as they really are, not as what we wish them to be, or how others make us see them. We are masters of our minds and hearts: we are liberated. We *want* nothing; we *have* nothing; we *lack* nothing; we *are* nothing—yet we are the happiest around. We have awakened. No more questions, no need for answers.⁷

2 The four points: a philosophical background⁸

2.1 LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY. One of the difficulties of studying early Buddhism (or any kind of Buddhism except perhaps “western” Buddhism) is the language we are using, that is, English. Even as

⁴ The suttas list a total of 16 doubts, arising from the speculative nature of doubts concerning being and becoming (**Kaccana,gotta S** & SD 6.13 (2)). On the 16 doubts is found in **Sabb’āsava S** (M 2.7 f/1:8), SD 30.3, **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38.23/1:265), SD 7.10, **Paccaya S** (S 12.20/2:26 f), SD 39.5 & **Vism** 19.6/599. On doubt, see **Vicikicchā**, SD 32.8.

⁵ Generally, I have used “bad” where the context has the sense of *pāpa*, but often the average reader would understand this as “evil.” However, if we disregard the theistic overtones of “evil,” the two words are practically synonyms, at least as I’ve used them. On the ethical difference btw “bad” and “evil,” see **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7.

⁶ See Sn 620 = Dh 396. See Piya Tan, “You have to be somebody before you can be nobody.” R128 (100317).

⁷ On the 4 ways of answering a question, see **Pañha Vyākaraṇa S** (A 4.42/2:46), SD 46.12.

⁸ See eg Jayatilke 1963:333-351; Seyfort Ruegg 1977:1-71; Priest 2010:24-54.

the world's leading academic language, English has the baggage of western learning (such as philosophy) and religion (Judaeo-Christianity). As such, it is useful if we, from the start, persevere to use available English and western words and terms, freeing them from their baggages and introducing new words and terms where necessary, we should be able to better understand the Buddha's teachings for the sake of personal liberation, which is the avowed intention of this series.

Such a process is three-phased. Firstly, we should make some effort to know, as least on some elementary level, the meaning and usage of the English or western term, as there are some terms that are clearly specific to western ideas. For example, it is certainly unhelpful to translate rebirth as "resurrection." Thankfully, such terms are few, and becoming fewer, if we are able to carefully and usefully redefine them to reflect Buddhist usage, where necessary.

Secondly, we should be aware of anglicized Buddhist and related Indian terms. A key criterion here is that such words are found in a major English dictionary (such as the Oxford English Dictionary or the Merriam-Webster International Dictionary). Such words include the following: arhat, bodhisattva, buddha, dharma, dhyana, Hinayana, karma, Mahayana, mandala, nirvana, samadhi, sangha, stupa, sutra, sastra. It is wiser to use such words rather than use a new translation, as it takes some time and effort to connect with the Buddhist meaning. It is useful at the start to define our usage of such terms, and to point out special or context usages.⁹

Thirdly, only where the audience is thoroughly familiar with Buddhism, or have mastered the basic Buddhist vocabulary and key Buddhist ideas, we can freely use the original Pali or Indian terms in the course of teaching. Even then, new terms often occur as we discuss new suttas and texts. Such terms should be explained, at least in the notes, as they arise, for the benefit of the audience. The point, of course, remains that we, as teachers, must ourselves prepare the lessons well and knowing the key words before we actually teach.

2.2 CATUṢKOṬI AS TETRALEMMA

2.2.1 Significance of the *catuṣkoṭi*.

2.2.1.1 THE BUDDHIST TETRALEMMA. Western scholars studying early Buddhism often use western terms and categories to understand Buddhism. While this is useful for comparative study, such an approach would be like looking at things through coloured lenses. Even where certain terms appear to be good translations of Buddhist ones, such terms should be carefully redefined to reflect the Buddhist sense and usage. The study of *catuṣkoṭi* ("the four points") or "four alternatives" is often troubled by scholars using western lenses to look at a Buddhist conception.¹⁰

One of the earliest references to the *catuṣkoṭi* is in the early 1930s, in a German work (Shayer 1933: 93), where it is referred to as the tetralemma ("four statements or headings"), and each *koṭi* is taken as a proposition. The **tetralemma** is a figure that features prominently in the classical logic of the Greeks. It states that with reference to any a logical proposition *p*, there are four possibilities [10.1.1]:

		<u>simple examples</u>
<i>p</i>	existence	this is a person
not- <i>p</i>	non-existence	this is <i>not</i> a person (a table)
both <i>p</i> & not- <i>p</i>	both	a person yet not a person (an unconscious person)
neither <i>p</i> nor not- <i>p</i>	neither	a table

2.2.1.2 ARISTOTLE'S TETRALEMMA. One of the important roots of Western logic is in the logic of Aristotle, also known as term logic or traditional logic. It is based on three classic "laws of thought" (attributed to Aristotle himself), that is, (1) the law of identity, (2) the law of non-contradiction, and (3) the law of the excluded middle.¹¹

⁹ See Dh 97, SD 10.6.

¹⁰ See eg Ruegg 1977 App II.

¹¹ Cf Jayatilleke, where he mentions a fourth, "the law of double negation" (1963:335).

(1) **The law of identity**, in logic, states that an object is the same as itself: $A \rightarrow A$ (if you have A, then you have A), which can also be listed as $A \equiv A$ or A iff A (A if-and-only-if A), which is of course, redundant, a tautology, “A is A” (a way of saying the same thing).

(2) **The law of non-contradiction** (or the law of contradiction, or the principle of non-contradiction, or the principle of contradiction) states that contradictory statements cannot both be true in the same sense, eg, the two propositions “A is B and “A is not B” are mutually exclusive.

(3) **The law of the excluded middle** (or the principle of excluded middle) states that for any proposition, either that proposition is true, or its negation is. The law is also known as the law (or principle) of the excluded third (or of the excluded middle), or, in Latin, *principium tertii exclusi*, or *tertium non datur*, “no third (possibility) is given.”

2.2.1.3 THE FOUR ALTERNATIVES ARE NOT LAWS OF THOUGHT. If we carefully look at the four alternatives, we will see that they are not laws of thoughts, and as such should not and do not make easy comparative study with western logic. Such academic exercises might be a scholar’s love or duty, but as Buddhist practitioners, our purpose is to understand what their role is (or are) in early Buddhism so that we understand our own minds better.

Let us look at these four predications or statements, quite common in the Buddha’s time (and in fact today, too), using this well known set of alternative views or tetralemma:¹² [2.2.2]

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| (1) p | eg “there <i>is</i> an afterlife” (<i>atthi paro loko</i> , literally “the next world exists”); |
| (2) not-p | eg “there is <i>no</i> afterlife” (<i>n’atthi paro loko</i>); ¹³ |
| (3) both p and not-p | eg “there is and is not an afterlife” (<i>atthi ca n’atthi ca para loko</i>); |
| (4) neither p nor not-p | eg “there neither is nor is not an afterlife” (<i>n’ev’atthi na n’atthi paro loko</i>). |

Now let us apply these four alternatives to a new element, the tathagata,¹⁴ which is a common set in the suttas [5.1]:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| (1) x is p | eg “a tathāgata <u>exists</u> (<i>hoti</i>) ¹⁵ after death”; |
| (2) x is not-p | eg “a tathāgata does <u>not</u> exist (<i>na hoti</i>) after death”; |
| (3) x is both p and not-p | eg “a tathāgata <u>both</u> exists and does not exist after death”; |
| (4) x is neither p nor not-p | eg “a tathāgata <u>neither</u> exists nor not exist after death.” [5.1] |

It is clear here that

- (1) is not the law of identity, but a simple affirmative categorical statement;
- (2) is not the law of non-contradiction, but a negative statement or denial: we are not certain whether it is contradictory or merely the contrary of (1).¹⁶

¹² On this term, see Robinson 1967:301. The term is used here simple as a helpful term for the 4 alternatives, be-
reft of its philosophical technicalities.

¹³ In itself, this is interesting, as it is incl in the def of wrong view: “There is this world, no other world,” *n’atthi ayam loko, n’atthi para, loko*, lit “this world does not exist, the next world does not exist.” The fuller def occurs in **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41.10/1:287), SD 5.7 & **Apaññaka S** (M 60.5-12/1:402-404), SD 35.5; also **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.22-24/1:55 f), SD 8. For comys on such wrong views, see Bodhi 1989:69-86 (on Sāmañña,phala S, D 2). See also Jayatilleke 1963:79 f, 91 f.

¹⁴ On the *tathāgata*, see (4.2.1) n.

¹⁵ On the significance of the verb *hoti* in this tetralemma, see (7.2).

¹⁶ The “**contradictory**” of any given proposition is one that constitutes a mere denial of that proposition. For example, the “contradictory” of the proposition, “The Buddha was Singaporean” is the proposition that it is not the case that “the Buddha was Singaporean.” In other words, the “contradictory” of any given proposition (p) is that a proposition which is true if p is false, and which is false if p is true, ie, the two propositions “contradict” (or “re-
fute”) one another. It is impossible for contradictories to be true at the same time, but it is also impossible for them to be false at the same time. In other words, one of the propositions must be true.

Consider now the proposition, “The Buddha was Chinese.” This proposition is clearly incompatible with the pro-
position, “The Buddha was Singaporean.” Both of them cannot be true. On the other hand, both of them can be *false*.

- (3) is not recognized in Aristotelian (western) logic because it “violates” the law of non-contradiction (in other words, a proposition must be either “true” or “false,” without a any other possibility).¹⁷
- (4) is not recognized in Aristotelian (western) logic because it “violates” the law of the excluded middle (in other words, a proposition must be either “true” or “false,” without a any other possibility).¹⁸

Alternatives (3) and (4) clearly violate the basic laws of Aristotelian logic. The reason for this is that Aristotelian logic is philosophical and technical, while the four alternatives (as used by the Buddha) are for the sake of freeing our minds from thought, with the goal of liberating us from suffering by awakening to true reality and nirvana.¹⁹

2.2.2 Misuse of the alternatives: Hedging. The four alternatives were apparently known to teachers before the Buddha’s times, but were certainly well known in his own time. In **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2) the rajah Ajāta,sattu is recorded as reporting to the Buddha his dissatisfaction with the philosophy of **Sañjaya Belaṭṭha,putta**, who attempts to avoid taking any stand by rejecting all the four possible alternatives, but he does so in a disingenuously oblique way (that is, by ways of endless hedging or equivocation), thus:

- (1) ‘If you were to ask me whether there is a world beyond [a hereafter], if I thought that it exists, I would declare to you, “It is so.” But I do not say it is this. I do not say it is that. I do not say it is otherwise. I do not say it is not so. I do not say it is not not so.
- (2) ...whether there is *no* world beyond...
- (3) ...whether there *both* is and is not a world beyond ...
- (4) ...whether there *neither* is nor is not a world beyond...

[He speaks in the same way for three other topics, that is, on spontaneously-born beings, on karmic fruits, and the afterlife of a saint.]

Thus, bhante, when asked about a fruit of recluship, visible here and now, Sañjaya Belaṭṭha,putta answered with **evasion**. Just as if a person, bhante, when asked about a mango, were to answer with a breadfruit; or, bhante, when asked about a breadfruit, were to answer with a mango, in the same way, bhante, when asked about a fruit of recluship, visible here and now, Sañjaya Belaṭṭha,putta answered with evasion. (D 2.31-32/1:58 f) = SD 8.10²⁰

In **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1), the Buddha describes Sañjaya’s attitude as “eel-wriggling” (*amara-vikkhepikā*) or “endless hedging (or equivocation).”²¹ Although both the rajah and the Buddha (and perhaps many others) are unimpressed by the apparently evasive hedging verbosity of Sañjaya, he is regarded by some modern scholars to be a master of skepticism.²² In fact, Sañjaya was also the erstwhile teacher of Sāriputta and Moggāllana before they joined the Buddha’s order.²³

2.2.3 Usefulness of the 4 alternatives. The Buddha is more concerned with the spiritual aspects of human language and reasoning (especially logic) rather than their philosophical significance, a develop-

(Indeed, both of them *are* false, since he was “Indian.” The proposition, “The Buddha was Singaporean,” is, therefore, said to be “**contrary**” to (or is one of the “contraries” of) the proposition, “The Buddha was Chinese” and vice versa. In other words, a “contrary” of any given proposition (p) is a proposition which is false if p is true, but which is *not* necessarily true if p is false. Contraries are mutually exclusive: it is impossible for both to be true at the same time, but both can be false at the same time. They are merely “opposites” of one another. See Cook 2009 svv Contradictory & Contrary.

¹⁷ See Jayatilleke 1963:335 (esp §564), 339 (esp §572).

¹⁸ Statements of this nature however do occur in everyday speech even in western languages: see eg C Lewy, “Why are the calculi of logic and arithmetic applicable to reality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Soc Supplementary* 20 1946:36, 37.

¹⁹ For some helpful scholarly study, see Jayatilleke 1963:335-354.

²⁰ See Jayatilleke 1963:337 f.

²¹ D 1.61/1:24 f = SD 25.2.

²² See eg Raju 1953.

²³ On Sañjaya, see **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.30/1:58) n = SD 8.10.

ment we see in later Indian Buddhism.²⁴ While language and reasoning are useful means of effective communication of ideas, they remain merely as means of conceptual exchanges. The Buddha constantly and consistently warns us especially not to fall into the trap of reifying (seeing as fixed things) what are really on-going mental and physical processes.

In this connection, Puhakka (2003) notes how language and philosophy can cast a “spell of reality” by way of reifying what constitutes a sentient being, a spell that is broken by understanding the four alternatives. We are typically unaware of taking up something as real. For, as soon as we reify it into “reality,” giving it an identity (p), as it were, it “takes us.” We are overwhelmed by an assumption of its “reality.” (2003:134-145)

Later Buddhist philosophers (such as Dignāga), show us that it is impossible to regard that something *is* (p), or exists, without, at least momentarily, ignoring or denying that which it *is not* (not-p). The act of taking something as real, as such, necessarily involves *some degree of unconsciousness or lack of awareness*. This is true even in the simple act of perception when we see a figure that we become aware of as “something.”

2.2.4 Definition by exclusion. Our minds tend to work with words (language and construction of meanings)²⁵ or through reasoning (inference).²⁶ We hear words, or see someone or something happening, and we “make sense” of them. Even in the absence of such input, we go on to work out our conclusions and generate ideas based on those inputs and our past conditionings. One such interesting and useful concept is that of *apoha*.

Apoha is an Indian Buddhist logical term meaning “negation by exclusion.” More fully, it is *anya-poha*, meaning the “exclusion by negation of others” (*atad,dvya,vrtti*). Those things that are excluded are called *apohya*. For example, the word “cow” gives its own meaning only by the exclusion of all those things which are *not* cows. *Apoha*, however, is not an object of sense-perception (*pratyaksa*). It is apprehensible only through words or inference.

The term *apoha* was first explicitly articulated in the works of **Dignāga** (fl 425). The concept of *apoha* depends on the law of contradiction. The words “blue” and “non-blue,” for example, negate each other because they are opposites. According to Dignāga, a similar exclusion of others is due to the non-apprehension of the meaning of a particular word in other words. A particular word excludes the other particular words because its own meaning is not apprehended in the other ones. For example, the word “simsap tree” excludes the word “palash tree” because its own meaning is not available in the latter one.

Dignāga admits that *apoha* can also possess some characteristics of the realists’ universal (*anya-poha*), such as oneness, eternity, complete subsistence in each individual, etc. He accepts the concept of a universal through the negation of its non-self. He explains that if the non-self of a universal is absent in a locus, then its presence in that locus can be inferred. For example, a cow is qualified by the deniability of the non-cow.²⁷

2.2.5 Gestalt images. We have a habit of projecting our ideas onto our experiences. In an important way, this is the only way most of us cognize or learn things—by making our own identikit image of the reality before us. In effect, we have tried to define things into being. A common example is the God-idea: we project all our needs and fears into it, and take it to be real, so that our lives are overwhelmed with it.

While our minds are fixed on a delimited image of reality, it seems to be meaningful only to the exclusion of everything else. As Gestalt (German, “shape”) images²⁸ demonstrate, for each figure perceived,

²⁴ On later philosophical Buddhist developments in India, see eg Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, London. 2000.

²⁵ On the nature of meaning, see **Notion of *ditthi***, SD 40a.1 (13) esp (13.3) Meaning of “meaning.”

²⁶ On inference, see **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65) @ SD 35.4a (3a(6)). On **Buddhist logic & inference**, see **Language & discourse**, SD 26.11 (4.2, 7.3, 8, 9).

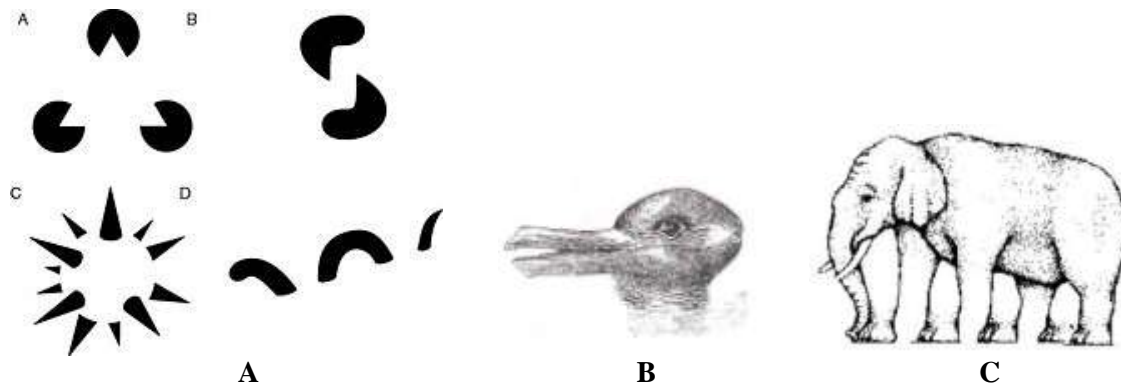
²⁷ This concept of Dignāga’s is similar to that of the German philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) who also thinks that the universality of a concept is posited through its negativity. See eg Siderits 1982; Katsura 1991.

²⁸ **Gestalt** is a school of thought in psychology that focusses on perception and emphasizes the organization of experience into wholes that are more than the sums of their parts. It was also the first modern point of view that emphasizes creative insight in problem solving. The term **Gestaltqualität** refers to a perceptual attribute or quality that emerges from the organization of sensory elements but is not reducible to the sum of those elements. A melody is a

there is a background of which we are not fully conscious of. This “blindness” and projection extend to texts or verbal exchanges. For every *text* we think we understand, there is a *context* we might not be fully aware of. Thus, with every image we notice or a reality we affirm, there inevitably remains some level of unawareness.

Here are some Gestalt images. Notice in the images in A (left), how we “see” shapes or spaces that are not really there. Is B (centre) a picture of a duck or a rabbit? If we focus on the left (“the beak”), it appears as a duck. If we focus on the right (“the mouth”), it seems to be a rabbit. In C, how many legs does the elephant seem to have?

Fig 2.2.3 Gestalt images



How do we apply the four alternatives here? Take B, for example, let us begin by saying (1) it is a rabbit; (2) it is not a rabbit (it is a duck); (3) it is both a rabbit and a duck; (4) it is neither (a picture with black and white dots). All these apply, and yet, if we were really a duck or a rabbit looking at this picture (if we are even aware of it at all), it is none of the above!

By understanding the nature of the four alternatives, we have a better idea of being and non-being, and how we reify reality. From the first alternative (*koti*), we try to see what something really *is*. The second alternative makes us aware of what it is *not*. The third alternative is the juxtaposition of both aspects of reality as a whole, that is, seeing what we have defined or projected into being, and what has been excluded, so that we have a fuller picture or true reality. The fourth alternative shows that there is always something other than what we have put together that we are still unaware of. There are other possible realities that we need to examine.

3 Truth and the four alternatives

3.1 THE TRUTH IS ONE. Let us examine the Gestalt image once more: what do they teach us. One useful answer is that we tend to perceive things in our own way, even project things (such as shapes and spaces) which are not there. In “real” life, it is even more dramatic: we tend to perceive events and people the way we have conditioned by our past, and we project ideas onto external situations. The reality is that all these effects are “mind-made” (*mano,maya*). This is the one thing that is true of all the responses to these images with whichever alternative we choose as our reality.

One of the earliest teachings of the Buddha is that “The truth is one, not two” (*ekam hi saccam na dutiyam atthi*, Sn 884). It is this fact that we need to examine and understand. The ancient commentary on this line, found in the Mahā Niddeśa, explains that the “one truth,” or better, “the one true reality,” is the ending of suffering, nirvana. Here *sacca* is not philosophical “truth,” but a synonym for *true reality*.

good example of this. The melody is not in the notes as the melody’s key can be changed so none of the notes are the same, and the original notes can be rearranged so as to form a different melody.

On a practical level, this one truth, with which we attain to the suffering's ending, is of course the noble eightfold path (Nm 2:292; SnA 555). This is succinct way of talking about the four noble truths. Elsewhere, in the same spirit of the one truth, the Buddha declares: "Both before²⁹ and now what I teach is suffering and the ending of suffering."³⁰ All these different truths lead to only *one* true reality, that is, nirvana.

3.2 THE 4 TRUTH-VALUES. When we talk about questions, if it is to be worthwhile, we must assume—and rightly so—that we are speaking the *truth* and what we are speaking about is *true*. However, on the unawakened worldly level, truth is not always one, as they, more often, can come in the form of various alternatives. How many alternative truths, or, more exactly, truth-values are there? Or more simply, in how many ways can we speak of something as being true? ("True" here means what actually *exists (is)* or actually *has happened*, rightly or wrongly, good or bad.)

Modern philosophers often argue whether the four alternatives are "propositions." If they are, then they could be laid out using logical algebra to see if they are valid or not, and so on.³¹ Technically, a proposition is the object that is the meaning, or content, of a *statement* or assertion. Philosophers and logicians are not fully agreed as to whether or not propositions exist. If they do exist, propositions are typically taken to be the objects of *propositional attitudes*, such as belief and desire, that is, on this view, when we believe something, or desire for something to be true, it is the proposition that we believe, or desire to become true.³²

Scholars of Buddhist philosophy and related fields often discuss the four alternatives in connection with Nāgārjuna's ideas.³³ However, here we will focus on these alternatives as they are found in the early suttas, for a better understanding of the Buddha's teachings on moral conduct, mental training and wisdom. Our avowed goal is not philosophy, but Dharma learning and practice with the aspiration of attaining at least streamwinning in this life.³⁴

Without going too much into philosophy, it can be said that the Buddha rejects the four alternatives because they do *not* have any truth value, especially in connection with the ideas they are used to frame. Clearly, there is no spiritual benefit in speculation about something that does not exist. This may, of course, be useful in, say, philosophy, for the examination of concepts and conceptions. The Buddhist training is about harmonizing of the body and of speech, for the sake of cultivating the mind to focus fully on itself, and to enjoy the resultant bliss, and use the emergent clarity to cultivate liberating wisdom.

4 Negating the four alternatives

4.1 PURPOSE OF STUDY. When referring to the deeper aspects of Buddhist training, especially in wisdom training, the Buddha often resorts to what, in modern learning, is technically known as **apophasis**, that is, the use of *negative language* to express a transcendental truth or reality, such as awakening or nirvana.³⁵ The key reason for this is that language, which is word based that generate concepts, are inadequate for any useful understanding of supralinguistic aspect of Buddhist experience such as dhyana and awakening, which are beyond words and concepts.³⁶

²⁹ Comy: That is, from as early as the first discourse given under the Bodhi tree (S 5:420-424/56.11; V 1:10-12).

³⁰ *Pubbe cāhaṃ...etarahi ca dukkhañ c'eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodham. Alaggadūpama S* (M 22.38/-1:140), SD 3.13; *Anurādha S* (S 22.86.21/3:118), SD 21.13. The line is explained in *Yamaka S* (S 22.85.37/3:112), SD 21.12.

³¹ See eg Puhakka 2003

³² Based on Roy T Cook 2009, sv Proposition. See **Notion of *ditthi***, SD 40a.1 (4.3).

³³ See eg Robinson 1972; Ruegg 1977.

³⁴ See **Entering the stream**, SD 3.3.

³⁵ A famous example is that of **Dh 97**, SD 10.6; cf Dh 383. See also **Notion of *ditthi***, SD 40a.1 (6.3).

³⁶ Often described as "beyond reasoning," *atakkāvacara* (V 1:4,35 (cf Mvst 3:314,2) = D 2:36,3 = 37,24; D 1:13,-20; M 1:167,32 = S 1:136,10 ≠ M 1:487,7 ≠ 2:172,31; A 2:189,15; It 2.2.6/37; UA 391). Further see (**Musila Nārada**) **Kosambī S** (S 12.68/2:115-118), SD 70.11 & **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, SD 33.1b (6.2.2).

Here, we shall focus on the Buddha's responses to the four alternatives, which include his silence³⁷ on certain topics, especially the ten speculative questions [6]. Our purpose is to understand the nature of questions and questioning in relation to spiritual cultivation. As such, we shall analyse some key passages that deal with these four alternatives.

When studying such passages, we should look out for two important profiles, that of the audience or questioner, and that of the teaching itself. The questions asked and how they are asked often gives us clues to their background and personality. How the Buddha answers them gives us a good idea on how we are to examine our own minds and work out our own efforts for self-understanding and self-liberation.

4.2 DESCRIBING AN ARHAT'S AFTER-DEATH STATE

4.2.1 The arhat after death. The suttas often remind us regarding the proper use of words and concepts, and their true nature.³⁸ They may be fingers pointing to the moon, but none of them is the moon: the word is *not* the thing, the real thing is not the thing named.³⁹ We could think or talk about some thing, but it is not the real thing, especially when we have not attained such a state, when we are not awakened. Still, we can still *talk* about it, but we must remember we are then playing word-games, and we need to keep to the rules, if it is going to be enjoyable at least.

In this connection, it is instructive to reflect on two suttas, listed consecutively in **the Khandha Saṅgīyutta**—the connected sayings on the aggregates—that is, **the Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85) and **the Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.86), both dealing with the nature of the arhat. Both suttas use the colloquial term *tathāgata*, usually translated as “being” (*satta*),⁴⁰ and seems to be a generic term for all sentient beings, including the liberated saints (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist).

4.2.2 Yamaka: The arhat is not annihilated. **The Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85) records how the monk Yamaka holds the wrong view that arhats cease to be when they die. Yamaka thinks that an arhat is “annihilated and perishes when the body breaks up and does not exist after death” (§2). His view edges on eternalism, since he holds that for the unawakened, some kind of abiding entity goes on transmigrating.

Sāriputta, using the same reasoning as that given in **the Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.85) [below], rebukes Yamaka for his wrong view, and admonishes him into the right path.⁴¹ Sāriputta gives an exposition on the true nature of **the five aggregates** (§§14-19), resulting in Yamaka's becoming a streamwinner (§20b).⁴²

4.2.3 Anurādha: No “fifth” alternative. **The Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.86 = S 44.2) deals with the monk Anurādha's uncertainty regarding the nature of a tathagata (here referring to an arhat) after death. He holds the view that the state of a *tathagata*,⁴³ here meaning the arhat, is “apart” from the four logical premises of ancient Indian philosophy [§5], thinking that the Buddha would describe him “in some other way” (SA 2:286). In this way, he hold another wrong view, that of reifying an arhat after his death.

Early Buddhism rejects a “fifth” alternative, meaning “not the rest.” The reason is important to understand: such a stand would be dependent on the notion of the four alternatives. The fifth alternative then is still a *conditioned* truth. The Buddha finally leads Anurādha to the insight that even while still alive, an arhat cannot be identified with any of the five aggregates, or with anything outside of them, what more to say of his posthumous state [§21].

³⁷ See **The Buddha's silence**, SD 44.1.

³⁸ See **Working with concepts**, SD 68.7.

³⁹ On **the problem of language**, see *Saññā*, SD 17.4 (2-6).

⁴⁰ On *tathāgata* as “a being” (*satta*), see these texts & their comys: **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.2.27/1:27,24 f; DA 118.1, *tathāgato 'ti adhippeto*) ≠ **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63,2/1:426,14; MA 3:141,23), **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72.-9-14/1:484-486; MA 3:141,22, 199,2) ≠ **Khemā S** (S 44.1/4:376,26 f; SA 3:113,18); **Yamaka S** (S 22.85/3:111,14 +112,6; SA 2:311,1), AA 4:37; **Nānā Titthiyā S 1** (U 6.4/67,14; UA 340,6 (Ce Ee) 340, *tathāgato 'ti satto*; UA:Be *satto*; UA:Se *sattā*) ≠ Nm 64,20 (NmA 1:193,24). Cf **Anurādha S** (S 22.86.4/3:116), SD 21.13, where Comy explains *tathāgata* there as “your teacher” (ie the Buddha), but regarding him as a “being” (*tam tathāgato 'ti tumhākaṃ sathā tathāgato tam sattaṃ tathāgataṃ* (SA 2:312). See also **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63) @ SD 5.8 (3) & **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72) @ SD 6.15 (3.2). On Chin tr, see Analayo 2010:3.

⁴¹ See also Analayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, 2003:265.

⁴² S 22.85/3:109-116 = SD 21.12.

⁴³ On the translation of *tathāgata*, see **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72) @ SD 6.15 (3.2).

In fact, not only is there *no* fifth alternative, there is also *no* “ninth” alternative, a notion that is found in Mādhyamaka philosophy.⁴⁴ This ninth alternative is a conceptual construct deduced from negating all the four alternatives (which in effect is what the Buddha has done), and laying them out as a set of octads, that is, the four alternatives and their respective negations.⁴⁵ This last “alternative,” philosophically speaking, is emptiness (*suññatā*) or nirvana, but only in a manner of speaking. Conceptually, this helps us have an *idea* of the logical possibility, but nirvana, but it is *not* nirvana, which is not an idea or dependent on any other ideas.⁴⁶ In this sense, nirvana is to be liberated and be free of views.⁴⁷ [9.1.1]

4.3 CAUSE OF SUFFERING. The suttas not only remind us of the nature of language when talking about higher attainments and awakening [4.2], but that the same care must be taken when we are talking about more mundane states, such as suffering (that is, the nature of worldly existence). Of special interest here is the Buddha’s teachings given to the naked ascetic (*acela*) Kassapa as recorded in **the Acela Kassapa Sutta** (S 12.17).

Acela Kassapa asks the Buddha about the nature of suffering, which is viewed in terms of the four alternatives, thus:

- | | |
|--|--|
| (1) suffering is self-created | (<i>sayam kataṃ dukkham</i>); (§7) |
| (2) suffering is created by others | (<i>param kataṃ dukkham</i>); (§8) |
| (3) suffering is self-created and other-created | (<i>sayam katañ ca param katañ ca dukkham</i>); (§9) |
| (4) suffering arises by chance (ie neither self-created nor other-created) | (<i>adhicca, samuppannam</i>); (§10) |
| (5) there is no suffering | (<i>n’atthi dukkham</i>). (§11) |

(S 12.17/2:18-22) = SD 18.5

To all these statements, the Buddha’s reply is “Do not speak thus,”⁴⁸ Kassapa.” Note that, instead of the usual *no h’etaṃ* (“It is not so” or simply “No”), the Buddha’s response is that Kassapa should not speak so. The reason for this is because Kassapa has framed his question on suffering in what is close to the four alternatives and extreme views. Kassapa, in other words, is asking the wrong questions and also holding wrong views. Let us examine a few of the reasons why his approach is problematic.

(1) **The first wrong view**—that suffering is self-created—as the Buddha show, is an allusion to **eternalism** (*sassata, diṭṭhi*), that the eternal self exists. In **the Kaccāyana, gotta Sutta** (S 12.15), the Buddha, in explaining the nature of right view (*sammā, diṭṭhi*), declares that the world is led by two extreme views: that everything exists (*sabbam atthi*) and that everything does not exist (*sabbam n’atthi*).⁴⁹ While the former view, that of existence (*atthitā*) [7.2], is the same as eternalism (*sassata*), the latter, the view of “non-existence” (*natthitā*), is synonymous with annihilation (*uccheda*) (SA 2:32).⁵⁰

(2) **The second wrong view**—that suffering is created by others—denies the self as well as personal responsibility, and alludes to a form of **annihilationism** (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*).⁵¹ However, if one believes that suffering is the fiat of another being (God or a non-human), then this wrong view is that of **eternalism**, which can also find expression as *theism* (everything is due to God), *determinism* (everything is due to

⁴⁴ See Graham Priest 2010:39 (§4.3).

⁴⁵ See **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10 (6.1)

⁴⁶ See **The notion of diṭṭhi**, SD 40a.1.

⁴⁷ S 22.86/3:116-119 = S 44.2/4:381-384 = SD 21.13.

⁴⁸ “Do not speak thus,” *mā h’evaṃ*, which Comy glosses as *mā evaṃ abhaṇi* (SA 2:35; also: SA 1:217; AA 5:58). Other Comys: *evaṃ mā bhaṇi ti* (DA 2:486; SA 2:87; AA 3:150); *mā evaṃ āha, mā evaṃ abhaṇi ti* (SnA 2:475). See SD 18.5 (2.4).

⁴⁹ S 12.15.7/2:17 = SD 6.13.

⁵⁰ However, on the proper use of these two terms as *notions*, see SD 16.3 (2).

⁵¹ A full blown form of annihilationism is found in the teachings of the sectarian teacher, Ajita Kesakambala, who taught an amoral materialism (there is no karma, no rebirth, neither good nor evil: see **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2.23/-1:55), SD 8.10.

past action),⁵² or *fatalism* (there is no causality, everything is predetermined). These three ideas are stated in the **Tiṭṭh'āyatana Sutta** (A 3.61).⁵³

(3) **The third wrong view** is a syncretic alternative, a sort of **partial eternalism** (*ekacca sassata, -vāda*). The **Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1) mentions two broad types of partial eternalism: theistic views that the creator-God is eternal but his creatures are not, and the rationalist view that the body is impermanent but the mind or consciousness is not.⁵⁴

(4) **The fourth wrong view** is the doctrine of **fortuitous arising** (*adhicca, samuppanna, vāda*). The **Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1) mentions two types of fortuitous arising: the view of a non-conscious being (*asañña, satta*) reborn here but recalls only his last life, and a rationalist who fabricates such a view.⁵⁵

(5) **The fifth wrong view** denies suffering altogether (*n'atthika, vāda*), as expressed by prince Pāyāsi.⁵⁶ This wrong view is also known as the notion of “non-existence” (*natthitā*), also known as “annihilationism” (*uccheda*), as explained in the **Kaccāyana, gotta Sutta** (S 12.15) above, under (1).

All these views are wrong because they either subscribe to the one of the extremes of self or other (both entailing notions of an abiding entity), or extreme notions of existence and of non-existence. Reality is not so clear cut, but depends on the viewer, that is, one's experiences are the effects of sense-contact and the resultant feelings. The **Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1), for example, explains how contact and feeling are crucial to the formation of views (*ditṭhi*), especially wrong views.⁵⁷

5 The 10 questions: a philosophical overview

5.1 THE 10 QUESTIONS AS A SET. The most famous basic list of wrong views is that of the 10 questions, the best known context of which is found in the **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā, putta Sutta** (M 63). The Sutta opens with the monk Māluṅkyā, putta wondering about the ten questions, thus:

Now, while the venerable Māluṅkyā, putta was alone in meditation, this thought⁵⁸ arose in his mind:

“These speculative views⁵⁹ have been left undetermined [unanswered] by the Blessed One, set aside⁶⁰ and rejected by him, namely:

The world

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) The world is eternal | <i>sassato loko;</i> |
| (2) The world is not eternal | <i>asassato loko;</i> |
| (3) The world is finite | <i>antavā loko;</i> |
| (4) The world is infinite | <i>anantavā loko;</i> |

The self (or soul)⁶¹

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (5) The self is the same as the body | <i>taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ;</i> |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|

⁵² The early Buddhist texts attr such a view to the nirganthas or early Jains: see **Deva, dāha S** (M 101/2:214-228), SD 18.4.

⁵³ A 3.61.1-4/1:173 f = SD 6.8.

⁵⁴ See D 1.38-49/1:17-21 = SD 25.2.

⁵⁵ See D 1.68-69/1:28 f = SD 25.2.

⁵⁶ **Pāyāsi S** (D 23.5/2:319). See also DA 4:136; AA 3:62.

⁵⁷ D 1.105-130/1:40-43 = SD 25.2. See also **Vedanā**, SD 17.3 esp (3.2). Further see Kalupahana 1976:153-155.

⁵⁸ *Parivitaṅka*.

⁵⁹ *Ditṭhi, gatāni*. These 10 theses are better known as *avyākata*, “the unexplained” or questions “set aside” (*ṭhapanīya*) by the Buddha. They are listed in a number of suttas: **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9), SD 7.14, **Pāsādikā S** (D 29), **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā, putta S** (M 63), **Aggi Vaccha, gotta S** (M 72), SD 6.15, **Vacchagotta Saṃyutta** (S 3:257 ff); **Abyākata Saṃyutta** (S 4:374-403); etc. See KN Jayatilleke 1963:242 ff, 473 ff. See U 66. In **Milinda, pañha**, the double-horned question is used skillfully by way of Buddhist apologetics. See also Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 334 f, 350-352. See also **Abhaya Rāja, kumāra S**, SD 7.12 Intro.

⁶⁰ *Thapitāni* can also been “proved or demonstrated,” that is, “by other schools” (see Jayatilleke 1963:242).

⁶¹ See **Is there a soul?**, SD 2.16.

(6) The self and the body are separate	<i>aññam jīvam aññam sarīram;</i>
<u>The Tathāgata</u> [4.2]	
(7) The tathāgata [a sentient being] ⁶² exists after death	<i>hoti</i> ⁶³ <i>tathāgato param, marañā;</i>
(8) The tathāgata does not exist after death	<i>na hoti tathāgato param, marañā;</i>
(9) The tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death	<i>hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param, marañā;</i>
(10) The tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death	<i>n'eva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param, marañā.</i> (M 63.2/1:426), SD 5.8 ⁶⁴

These ten theses or questions⁶⁵ are said to be often and vigorously debated by “many different outside sectarian teachers, recluses, brahmins, and wanderers” (U 6.4),⁶⁶ but the Buddha refuses to address them in any way, except by his famous silence.⁶⁷ The key reason for this is that these are “questions wrongly put” (*no kallo pañho*)⁶⁸ and unrelated to the spiritual goal. As such, they are often said to be “undetermined [unanswered]...set aside...rejected” (*avyākatāni thapitāni paṭikkhitāni*) by the Buddha.⁶⁹

This table shows how the 10 theses are equated with the 62 ground for wrong views, stated in **the Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1):

<u>The 10 theses</u>	<u>The 62 grounds for wrong views</u> ⁷⁰
(1) The world is eternal	1-4 Eternalism (D 1:13-17)
(2) The world is not eternal	51-57 Annihilationism (D 1:34-36)
(3) The world is finite	9 Extensionism (D 1:22-24)
(4) The world is infinite	10 Extensionism (D 1:22-24)

⁶² Here, *tathāgata* has the sense of “a sentient being” (*satta*), as attested these texts and their comys: **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.2.27/1:27,24 f; DA 118.1) ≠ **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63.2/1:426,14; MA 3:141,23), **Aggi Vaccha, gotta S** (M 72.9-14/1:484-486; MA 3:199,2) ≠ **Khemā S** (S 44.1/4:376,26 f; SA 3:113,18); **Yamaka S** (S 22.85/3:111,14 +112,6; SA 2:311,1), **Nānā Titthiyā S 1** (U 6.4/67,14; UA 340,6 (Ce Ee) 340; UA:Be *satto*; UA:Se *sattā*) ≠ Nm 64,20 (NmA 1:193,24). Cf **Anurādha S** (S 22.86.4/3:116), SD 21.13, where Comy explains *tathāgata* there as “your teacher” (ie the Buddha), but regarding him as a “being” (*taṃ tathāgato 'ti tumhākaṃ satthā tathāgato taṃ sattam tathāgatam* (SA 2:312). See also **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63) @ SD 5.8 (3) & **Aggi Vaccha, gotta S** (M 72) @ SD 6.15 (3.2).

⁶³ On the significance of the verb *hoti* in this tetralemma, see (7.2).

⁶⁴ For other details on the 10 questions, such as their refs, see **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63) @ SD 5.8 (2). For philosophical discussions, see Jayatilleke 1963:242-276, 473-476. For an extended lists of 16 views, see **Nānā Titthiyā S 1** (U 6.4/66-69); **Nānā Titthiyā S 2** (U 6.5/69 f; also at D 3:137 f; cf S 2:22; A 3:440); also UA:M 874-876 & nn.

⁶⁵ The Mahāsaṅghika (4th cent BCE onwards), an early Indian school, believed to be one of the roots of early Mahāyāna, mention not 10, but 14, theses, by extending the theses, “the world is finite” (*antavā loko*) and “the world is eternal” (*sassato loko*), into 4 logical alternatives, instead of 2. Curiously, however, the Pali canon does not have such an extension.

⁶⁶ *Sambahulā nānā, titthiyā samaṇa, brāhmaṇā paribbājakā* (**Nānā Titthiyā S 1**, U 6.4/66 f), SD 40a.14.

⁶⁷ See **The Buddha's silence**, SD 44.1.

⁶⁸ See **Moliya Phagguna S** (S 12.12/2:13 f), **Avijjā S 1** (S 12.35/2:60-62). Cf U 66. Also **The Buddha's silence**, SD 44.1. Readings: (1) Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 242 ff, 334 f, 350-352, 473 ff; (2) Collins 1982:131-138 (§4.2); (3) Harvey 1995: 83-88 (*avyākatā* questions), 239-245 (on propositions 7-10 on the tathāgata); (4) Gethin 1998:66-68 (on **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S**, M 63). See also: (1) Intro to **Mahāli S** (D 6) in D:RD 1:186-190; (2) **Abhaya Rāja, kumāra S** (M 58) @ SD 7.12 Intro.

⁶⁹ Eg **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63.2/1:426), SD 5.8. See Jayatilleke 1963:288 f.

⁷⁰ For details of the headings in this column, see the table on “The 62 Grounds” at SD 25.1 (5-6) (more detailed). For a briefer summary, see Bodhi, *The All-embracing Net of Views*, Kandy, 1978:345-347.

(5) The self is the same as the body	19	Immortality	(D 1:30-32)
(6) The self and the body are separate	20	Immortality	(D 1:30-32)
(7) A tathāgata [a sentient being] exists after death	19-50	Immortality	(D 1:30-33)
(8) A tathāgata does not exist after death	51-57	Annihilationism	(D 1:34-36)
(9) A tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death	5-8	Partial eternalism	(D 1:17-22)
(10) A tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death	13-16	Endless hedging	(D 1:24-28)

Table 5.1 The 10 theses and the 62 grounds

5.2 BEGGING THE QUESTION. If a question is “wrongly put” (*no kalla*), it either has false or negative assumptions, or is a “loaded” or a trick question. A classic example is surely **Descartes’** famous statement, “I think, therefore I am.” At first sight, this seems about as unobjectionable a piece of reasoning as one could imagine. Some, however, have argued that Descartes’s argument fails because it begs the question. How is this so? To beg the question is in some way to assume in your argument precisely what you are trying to prove by it.

How does Descartes’s argument (at least as it is commonly rendered) beg the question? We can perhaps see how by setting out the argument into their components: (1) *I think*. (2) *Therefore, I am*. Notice that in the first line, Descartes says, “I think.” Now, in using “I,” he is arguably already assuming that he exists. Hence, what he goes on to deduce—“I am”—is already assumed in the premises. Therefore, the argument begs the question.⁷¹

Other question-begging statements include: “There is this world. Therefore, God must have created it.” “Believe in God; it makes you good.” “The Lotus Sutra is sacred because it is a sutra.” “The monk is holy because he wears a robe.” “He is a famous teacher; he must be right.”⁷²

Rupert Gettin, in *Foundations of Buddhism*, gives a modern example: If we answer “‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a question such as ‘Are Martians green?’” we are “drawn into accepting the validity of the question” (1998:68).⁷³ However, understanding the nature of such questions helps us train ourselves in clear thinking and to speak appropriately in what is related to the spiritual goal, or at least to personal development and happiness here and now.

5.3 THE NATURE OF THE QUESTIONS. First and foremost, it must be said that all these ten alternatives are rejected by the Buddha for reasons we have noted [5.1.1]. Here we will briefly survey the 10 alternatives or theses, and try to identify those who held such views in the Buddha’s time, or leading up to his times, and what we can learn from all this.

By way of summary, theses (1)-(4) were “world-views,” that is, the nature of the physical universe, or what we today call cosmology.⁷⁴ Theses (5)+(6) were “soul-views,” based on the belief in some kind of abiding substance or immanent entity. The four theses (7)-(10) were speculations about the state of the accomplished saint or perfect person, the *tathāgata* [4.2], who, in popular view, was still regarded as a “being” (*satta*).

⁷¹ See Julian Baggini & Peter S Fosl, *The Philosopher’s Toolkit*, 2nd ed, 2010:118 f.

⁷² For a discussion on such questions, it helps to be familiar with the “List of Common Fallacies,” such as those listed here: <http://www.nobeliefs.com/fallacies.htm>; also found in SD 9 Appendix II.

⁷³ In logic, this is called “begging the question” or “circular argument,” ie, taking for granted, in a statement or argument, precisely what is in dispute. Another modern example is the Christian evangelist’s trick of drawing the unwary into a one-sided indoctrination by asking “What do you think of Christ?” (Matt 22:42). The Buddhist answer is the noble silence. Cf D 25.20/3:53.

⁷⁴ For discussion regarding views on self and the world, see SD 25.3 (31.1).

6 The ten theses: a scriptural overview

6.01 References. The well known ten “undetermined, unexplained or undeclared” (*avyākata*) theses or alternatives, “set aside” (*thapita*) and “rejected” (*paṭikkhita*) by the Buddha due to their indeterminable nature and being questions wrongly put,⁷⁵ are stated or discussed in the following suttas:⁷⁶

Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta (M 63 *passim*/1:426-437) = SD 5.8,

Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta (M 72 *passim*/1:483-489),⁷⁷

Vacchagotta Saṃyutta (S 33/3:257-263),

Abyākata Saṃyutta (S 10/4:374-403),

Āhu Sutta (U 6.4/66-69), and

Titthā Sutta (U 6.5/69 f).

and also listed in a number of other places in the Pāli Canon, such as:

Brahma,jāla Sutta (D 1.1.29-31/1:12-39) [most detailed explanation of “the world”],

Mahāli Sutta (D 6.16-19/157 f) [only on “the self” (*jīva*)],⁷⁸ and

Pāsādikā Sutta (D 29.30-33/3:135-138) [only on the Tathāgata’s state].

A different list of speculative views are given in the **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38).⁷⁹

It is likely that these questions or statements formed a sort of questionnaire amongst the ancient Indian wanderers to determine a person’s position. The Buddha left these questions aside, declaring that they have nothing to do with spiritual development (§§25-26). The *avyākata* theses in the context of the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta are also discussed by Ñāṇananda in his *Concept and Reality* (1971:95-99).⁸⁰

6.02 Speculation and experience. The ten unanswered questions are speculative views, often useful in scholarly inquiry and in professional work—that is, worldly endeavours—but they are regarded as unnecessary, even distractions, to mental cultivation, when the mind needs to be free from worldly engagements, so that it can focus on itself for the sake of calm and clarity.

Two of the most important groups that the Buddha has to deal with in his teachings are the materialists (such as Ajita Kesa,kambalī) and the skeptics (such as Saṅjaya). Like the materialists, the Buddha emphasizes *experience* as the source of knowledge, and rejects metaphysics and theism. Like the skeptics, the Buddha critically evaluated the ideas of karma, rebirth and the self.

However, he sees both the materialists and the skeptics as going too far: the materialists base themselves too much on the physical body and this life, while the skeptics have little positive to teach in terms of spiritual action and attainment. Through his meditation experiences (that is, the clear insight that is their result), the Buddha accepts karma and rebirth, which, in significant ways, are uncritically rejected by both the parties.⁸¹ Furthermore, the Buddha is often willing and able to debate and demonstrate the veracity and usefulness of his teachings, the benefits of which have come down to us.

6.1 THE WORLD (OR UNIVERSE) IS ETERNAL (*sassata loko*).⁸² Theses (1)-(4) deal with the nature of the universe (or cosmology). While (1)+(2) view it in terms of *time* (eternal or non-eternal), (3)+(4) view it in terms of *space* (finite or infinite). **The Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) lists 4 eternalist grounds (nos 1-4 at D 1:13-17): they are explained in some detail in its commentary.⁸³

⁷⁵ Cf U 66. **Readings:** (1) Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 242 ff, 334 f, 350-352, 473 ff; (2) Collins 1982:131-138 (§4.2); (3) Harvey 1995: 83-88 (*avyākata* questions), 239-245 (on propositions 7-10 on the Tathāgata); (4) Gethin 1998:66-68 (on **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S**, M 63). See also: (1) Intro to **Mahāli S** (D 6) in D:RD 1:186-190; (2) Intro to **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58) tr in SD 7.11.

⁷⁶ For a detailed analysis of the 10 points, see **Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63), SD 5.8 (2).

⁷⁷ For details, see **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SD 6.15 (2-3).

⁷⁸ Where see T W Rhys Davids’ Intro to his tr (D:RD 1:186 -188).

⁷⁹ M 38.23/1:264 f = SD 7.10.

⁸⁰ For more detailed discussion on *avyākata*, see **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63), SD 5.8 (2-3).

⁸¹ See eg **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60/1:401-413), SD 35.5.

⁸² On the problems of eternalism, see SD 25.3 esp (30-44).

⁸³ Grounds nos 1-4: D 1.30-37/1:13-17 = SD 25.2; for comy, see SD 25.3.

Those who held this first view—that the universe is eternal—probably were those who asserted the eternity of the soul, that is, “the soul and the world are eternal” (*sassato attā ca loko ca*).⁸⁴ There is no mention at all in the early Buddhist texts of those who upheld the eternity of the soul *and* the non-eternity of the world, or vice versa.

Such a view is understandable because it was common belief that the soul and the world were intimately connected, as stated in the Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣads, which says that “one should regard only the *ātman* (soul) as the world” (*ātmānam eva lokam upāsita*) (BĀU 1.4.15).⁸⁵ Such a view, as such, tended to see the “world,” that is, the universe, as being eternal, since it was the eternal soul. The Buddha strongly rejects such notions.

6.2 THE WORLD IS NOT ETERNAL (*asassato loko*). The commentator Dhammapāla, commenting on this thesis, identifies it as the view of the materialists, that is, taking “world” here as “beings.”⁸⁶ Their view is that “The world of beings is not eternal” (*asassato ’ti sattā pi uccheda, vādā dassitā*) was held by the seven materialist schools known to Dhammapāla (UA 344).⁸⁷ **The Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1) lists 4 annihilationist grounds (nos 51-57 at D 1:34-36): they are explained in some detail in its commentary.⁸⁸

In our own times, both the world religions and scientific learning deeply influence many people to view the universe as having a limited life-span, even if it has evolved for billions of years. However, informed Buddhists and others⁸⁹ generally accept that there are universes other than ours, that is, parallel universes, as described in **the Kosala Sutta 1** (A 10.29).⁹⁰

Those who hold a linear conception of time (such as the God-believers) are likely to view the universe as having a fixed life-span. This view is clearly problematic because we may rightly ask what happens before that, or after that. The usual answer by such faith-inclined believers would often be: “Only God knows!” On the other hand, if we accept the nature of time as being cyclic—indeed whatever exists must exist in time—then the universe, even if it “collapses” or ends its cycle, would re-cycle itself and begin all over again.⁹¹

6.3 THE WORLD IS FINITE (*antavā loko*)

6.3.1 “The self is the world.” According to **the Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1) this is an extensionist (*ant-ānantikā*) view (no 9 at D 1:22-24): an “extensionist”⁹² is one who holds to the view of the finitude and the infinity of the world, that is, doctrines arising in connection with finitude, infinity, finitude and infinity, or neither finitude nor infinity (DA 1:115).⁹³

Ontologically (in terms of the nature of existence), the finitude or infinity here is that of the self (*attā*), here called “the world” (*loka*) because it “is looked upon” (*lokīyati*) by those led by views,⁹⁴ wishing to escape from samsara, or that merit, demerit and their fruits “are looked for” therein by those led by views. This gloss is probably based on the Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣads saying that “one should regard only the *ātman* (soul) as the world” (BĀU 1.4.15), mentioned above. [6.1]

⁸⁴ **Nānā Titthiyā S 2** (U 6.5/69 f; also at D 3:137 f; cf S 2:22; A 3:440).

⁸⁵ Jayatilleke 1963:248 §388.

⁸⁶ On the 3 senses of “world” (*loka*) as (1) formations (*sankhāra loka*), (2) beings (*satta loka*), and (3) space (or space-time), ie the physical universe (*okāsa loka*), see **Rohitassa S** (S 2.26), SD 7.2 (1) for details; see also Vism 7.37/204 f; DA 1:173; MA 1:397, 2:200. Here, the last (3), the physical universe, is meant.

⁸⁷ Jayatilleke 1963:244 §381.

⁸⁸ Grounds nos 51-57: D 1.84-91/1:34-36 = SD 25.2; for comy, see SD 25.3.

⁸⁹ Many God-believers (holding on to a linear conception of time), however, are likely to view that this is our only universe.

⁹⁰ A 10.29.2/5:59 f = SD 16.15; Kvu 13.1/476.

⁹¹ On the early Buddhist conception of the universe, see **Aggañña S** (D 27/3:80-97), SD 2.19.

⁹² The term is from T W Rhys Davids (D:RW 1:35).

⁹³ Ground no 9 (extensionist views of a finite universe): D 1.54-57/1:22-24.

⁹⁴ “[T]hose led by views,” *diṭṭhi, gatika*, which Bodhi tr as “theorists,” which however more properly applies to those with some kind of systematic approach. The sense here, I think, is more general.

According to the Jaina Sthānāṅga Sūtra, the finitists (*mita, vādī*), one of the eight classes of amoralists (*akiriya, vādī*), were so called because of their belief that the world is finite. In the Brahma, jāla Sutta, they are included as a class of extensionists (D 1:122).

6.3.2 A flat earth. The ancient world and their religions (including Buddhism) viewed⁹⁵ the world as a sphere. The first conception of the world as a sphere probably arose amongst the ancient Greeks from around the 6th century BCE, but this was mainly as a philosophical speculation.⁹⁶ It was only in the 3rd century BCE that Greek astronomy established this as a physical fact.

With the inroad of Greek culture into Asia, the Greek concept of a spherical earth surrounded by planets was supported by astronomers like Ārya, bhaṭa (476-550), Varaha, mihira (505-587) and Brahma, gup-ta (598-668), supplanting the ancient Indian belief in a flat-disc earth.⁹⁷ In China, Chinese Buddhists continued to uphold the flat-disc earth view until challenged by the Jesuit missionaries, who held high positions as court astronomers of the Ming dynasty (17th century), with the idea of a spherical earth.⁹⁸

6.3.3 Modern views. In our own times, whether the universe is finite (limited in size) or infinite (boundless) is the speculations of scientists (especially the theoretical physicists) and specialists scholars. It is not spiritually purposeful for a practising Buddhist to participate in such speculations, except perhaps in a friendly Buddhism/science or interfaith dialogue discussing the nature of the universe.⁹⁹

Ironically, in our own times, it is easier to be led by blind faith than ever before. Religions today are better organized, and in fact, any belief (such as the view that the whole world is bad, only “we” are good, so we should exterminate them) can be well organized, managed and propagated. More acceptance, even credibility, is often placed by the ignorant, gullible and desperate in *the messenger or preacher* than in the truth, validity and usefulness of *the message*. People tend to be *marketed*, rather than *educated* with religion.

The teacher is often wrongly placed *above* the teaching. As the world becomes more crowded and we become more mobile and uprooted, we tend to seek the “right” crowd that accepts our ways and whims. Such crowd-followers, according to **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65), tend to fall for what is heard (*anus-sava*) (including prophecies and revelations), lineage transmission (*paramparā*) (or received wisdom), hearsay or rumours (*iti, kira*) and mere scriptural authority (*piṭaka, sampadā*).¹⁰⁰ Buddhaghosa call such people, who rationalize their faith in these ways, *anussutika, takkī*, “those whose reasoning is based on traditions or hearsay (DA 1:106 f).

6.4 THE WORLD IS INFINITE (*anantavā loko*), that is, the physical universe has no limits. In ancient India, this was probably the view of the Jains and ascribed to their leader, **Nigaṅṭha Nāta,putta**, which was said to have claimed omniscience; hence, his knowledge of this.¹⁰¹

The Brahma, jāla Sutta (D 1) attributes this view to the extensionists [6.3.1], who were said to have come to this view on account of the meditation¹⁰² thinking, “This world is infinite, unbounded”¹⁰³ (ground

⁹⁵ “This disc-shaped world is finite” (*antava ayam loko parivaṭumo*, D 1:22+23). Jayatilleke tr of *parivaṭuma* (disc-shaped) as “spherical” is anachronistic (1963:245, 351). It should be noted however that the Buddha himself is silent on such matters as the shape of our world, but the suttas merely reflect the prevalent views of the time.

⁹⁶ D R Dicks. *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ Press. 1970:72-198.

⁹⁷ D Pingree, “History of mathematical astronomy in India,” *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* v15 1978:533-633 (533, 554 f); Thomas F Glick, Steven John Livesey, Faith Wallis (eds), *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine: An Encyclopedia*, NY: Routledge 2005:463.

⁹⁸ Jean-Claude Martzloff, “Space and time in Chinese texts of astronomy and of mathematical astronomy in the 17th and 18th centuries,” *Chinese Science* 11 1993-94: 66-92 (69); Christopher Cullen, “Joseph Needham on Chinese astronomy,” *Past and Present* 87 May 1980:39-53 (42+49); Christopher Cullen, “A Chinese Eratosthenes of the flat earth: A study of a fragment of cosmology in Huai Nan tzu 淮南子,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39,1 1976:106-127 (107-109).

⁹⁹ Jayatilleke 1963:244 f §382.

¹⁰⁰ A 3.65/1:188-193 = SD 35.4a.

¹⁰¹ **Lokāyatika Brāhmaṇa S** (A 9.38/4:429), SD 35.2.

¹⁰² They dwelled “perceiving infinitude in the world” (*ananta, saññī lokasmim*, D 1.2.18/1:23).

¹⁰³ *Ananto ayam loko apariyanto*, D 1.55/1:23 = SD 25.2.

no 10 at D 1:22-24).¹⁰⁴ The point here is that even if we were to attain deep meditation, without awakening, the visions that we experience can easily be misinterpreted, and more being read into it than what it really is.

The Udāna Commentary identifies the “infinite universe” view with the sage Kapila (that is, Sāṅkhya philosophy) and Kaṇāda (that is, Vaiśeṣika philosophy) (UA 339). While the Sāṅkhya rejected the God-idea, the Vaiśeṣika held that a “supreme being” wills the atoms of which the universe is composed. The Sāṅkhya regarded space as infinite;¹⁰⁵ the Vaiśeṣika, similarly, regarded space as all-evading.¹⁰⁶ However, these were probably post-Buddha developments, as the suttas do not mention them at all.¹⁰⁷

6.5 THE SOUL [SELF] IS THE SAME AS THE BODY (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*), which is a common view of the materialists.¹⁰⁸ The Sūtra, kṛtāṅga, a Jain work, mentioned a kind of philosophy that viewed that “the soul is the same as the body” (*taj, jīva, tac, charīr, ětti*).¹⁰⁹ This seems to be identical to the view of the first of the seven types of materialists listed in **the Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1) as **the annihilationists** (*uccheda, vāda*), the first of whom asserts that “This self [soul]...has physical form,¹¹⁰ is composed of the four great elements,¹¹¹ arising from mother and father.¹¹² The Brahma, jāla Sutta further lists the same view as **ground no 19**, that of those who uphold “conscious survival” (*saññī, vāda*) of the soul *with form* (D 1:30-32).¹¹³

This view is also attributed to the materialist teacher, **Ajita Kesa, kambalī**, one of the “six heterodox teachers,” who thought that “This person (that we are) is a composite of the four primary elements,” which at death return to their external states, and “the sense-faculties scatter into space.”¹¹⁴

One of the best known cases of the wrong view identifying the soul with the body is that held by the young nirgrantha (*nigaṇṭha, putta*) Saccaka, as recorded in **the Cūla Saccaka Sutta** (M 35). He tells the Buddha that each of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) is an abiding self or soul. The Buddha responded by explaining to him that we have no power over any of the aggregates. So how can we call any of them a self or soul?¹¹⁵

Similarly, in our own times, those who consciously or unconsciously, hold a materialistic view of life tend to view that the self, soul or consciousness is identical with the body, so that when the body perishes, the self, soul or consciousness too is annihilated, and there is no afterlife. Such a world-view would not place much value on moral conduct or karma, since it is not easy to see karmic workings and everything seems to end with death.¹¹⁶

6.6 THE SOUL [SELF] AND THE BODY ARE SEPARATE (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*).

¹⁰⁴ Ground no 10 (extensionist views of an infinite universe): D 1.54-57/1:22-24.

¹⁰⁵ *Sāṅkhya, pravacana, bhāṣya* 2.12.

¹⁰⁶ Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* 2, 1931:189.

¹⁰⁷ See Jayatilleke 1963:259-261 (§§393-394).

¹⁰⁸ Buddhaghosa identifies this as being the view of the “annihilationists” (*tena vo vādo uccheda, vādo hotīti*, DA 1:319 ad D 1:159 f). Dhammapāla (UA 340), however, identifies this view with the Ājīvikas, but they believed in survival, and therefore distinguished the soul from the body: cf however their theory of re-animation (Basham 1951: 28, 31-33, 49).

¹⁰⁹ In Pali, this is *taj, jīva, tac, charīra, vāda*: see Jayatilleke 1963:96 f, 243 (§379), 246 (§385).

¹¹⁰ *Rūpī*. On form (*rūpa*), see SD 17.2.

¹¹¹ “Composed of the four great elements,” *mahā, bhūtika*. On **the 4 elements** (*mahā, bhūta*), see **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 62.8/1:421 f), SD 3.11 4.

¹¹² *Ayaṃ rūpī cātum, mahā, bhūtika mātā, pettika, sambhavo*. Grounds nos 51-57 (annihilationists) (D 1.87-91/1:34-36f), SD 25.2. Cf thesis (2) above, where the same “grounds” are listed.

¹¹³ Ground no 19 (the self is the same as the body): D 1.75-77/1:30-32. Cf Ground no 21, where the soul “both had form and is formless” (D 1.76(A)/1:30), SD 25.2.

¹¹⁴ (D 2.22/1:55), SD 8.10. See also Jayatilleke 1963:95, 243 f.

¹¹⁵ M 35.10-11/1:230 = SD 26.5. Saccaka’s view resembles the idea that the “person” (*puruṣa*) is composed of 5 selves (*ātmā*), as proposed in Taittirīya Upaniṣad (2.2.5): see Jayatilleke 1963:220.

¹¹⁶ See **Dhamma & Abhidhamma**, SD 26.1 (1.2).

6.6.1 Soul-view and God-idea. Most of those who hold this view would regard only the physical body as being impermanent while the soul or self as being eternal. One of the best known cases of a wrong view that the soul is distinct from the body, is that held by the monk Sāti. In **the Mahā Taṇhā-saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38), he is recorded as holding the wrong view, “it is this same consciousness, not another, that runs and flows through the rounds of births.” The Buddha then corrects him, beginning with the key statement that “consciousness is dependently arisen, since, without a condition, there is no arising of consciousness.”¹¹⁷

This wrong view of a soul distinct from the body becomes more serious in those who believe in the God-idea. They might further think those who do not believe in their God would be thrown into hell, while believers are rewarded with eternal life in heaven. Such an aggravated wrong view only attracts more bad karma, reinforcing habitual acts that are self-centred or tribal in nature, where faith or pure belief is sufficient for salvation, to the exclusion of liberating wisdom. The danger is that such believers stop thinking for themselves and blindly follow the group thinking that they are always right and everyone else wrong.

6.6.2 The heterodox teachers. That the soul is distinct from the body would have been the view of **Pakudha Kaccāyana**, the atomist. He held that there were only seven unchanging, eternal, elemental bodies, that is, “The earth-body, the water-body, the fire-body, the wind-body, happiness, pain, and the soul as the seventh.” His view was that if someone kills another with a sword, it “merely passes through the spaces amongst the seven bodies and substances”!¹¹⁸ Such ideas probably found their way into the post-Buddha Katha Upaniṣad, where it is said, “If the killer thinks that he kills; | If the killed thinks that he is killed; | Both of them fail to understand. | He neither kills, nor is he killed” (KathU 2.19).¹¹⁹

Another of the six heretical teachers, **Pūraṇa Kassapa**, who taught antinomian ethics and non-action, that there was neither good nor evil, that is to say, there were no “actions.” The soul (*jīva*) was a passive observer of the body’s actions,¹²⁰ so that our lives are determined by fate (*niyati*), a teaching of another heterodox teacher, determinist **Makkhali Gosāla**, who taught moral determinism or fatalism.¹²¹

6.6.3 Developments. The idea of a passive soul that seems above morality is also found in the Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad, where it is said of the *ātman*: “He does not become more good by good actions or in any way less by bad actions” (BĀU 4.4.22). In the Sāṅkhya and Yoga schools of later Indian philosophy, the *puruṣa* (the all-pervasive Self), too, is regarded as an uninvolved spectator of the actions of the body and mind.

This slew of speculative ideas is reflective of the intellectual and moral turmoil during the Buddha’s time. In such a milieu, his voice of experience, reason and compassion, provide a meaningful alternative for those who could see the underlying doubt and helplessness of such views. It is worthwhile for us to spend some time discussing how such speculative views affected the later Indian mind and society, and why Indian Buddhism is unable to make a more significant impact on them.

6.7 THE TATHAGATA [A SENTIENT BEING]¹²² EXISTS AFTER DEATH (*hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā*). The following four theses (7)-(10) were speculations about the state of the accomplished saint or the perfect person, **the tathāgata** [4.2], who, in popular view, was still regarded as a “being” (*satta*). Under this

¹¹⁷ *Tad ev’idaṃ viññāṇaṃ sandhāvati saṃsarati anaññaṃ ti.* M 38/1:256-271 = SD 7.10.

¹¹⁸ D 2.25/1:56 = SD 8.10. See Jayatilleke 1963:267 f (§428).

¹¹⁹ Olivelle’s tr; cf Bhagavad, gītā 2.19: “We do not know which is better for us: whether we conquer them or they conquer us. Those sons of Dhṛtra, rāṣṭra, gathered before us, whom by slaying, we would not desire to live.”

¹²⁰ D 2.16-17/1:52 f = SD 8.10.

¹²¹ D 2.18-20/1:53-55 = SD 8.10.

¹²² Here, *tathāgata* has the sense of “a sentient being” (*satta*), as attested these texts and their comys: **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1.2.27/1:27,24 f; DA 118.1) ≠ **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā, putta S** (M 63,2/1:426,14; MA 3:141,23), **Aggi Vaccha, gotta S** (M 72.9-14/1:484-486; MA 3:199,2) ≠ **Khemā S** (S 44.1/4:376,26 f; SA 3:113,18); **Yamaka S** (S 22.85/3:111,14 +112,6; SA 2:311,1), **Nānā Titthiyā S 1** (U 6.4/67,14; UA 340,6 (Ce Ee) 340; UA:Be *satto*; UA:Se *sattā*) ≠ Nm 64,20 (NmA 1:193,24). Cf **Anurādha S** (S 22.86.4/3:116), SD 21.13, where Comy explains *tathāgata* there as “your teacher” (ie the Buddha), but regarding him as a “being” (*taṃ tathāgato ’ti tumhākaṃ satthā tathāgato taṃ sattam tathāgatam* (SA 2:312). See also **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā, putta S** (M 63) @ SD 5.8 (3) & **Aggi Vaccha, gotta S** (M 72) @ SD 6.15 (3.2).

heading, **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) lists a variety of grounds for views (nos 19-50), of those who uphold immortality, so called because they believe the soul “after death, does not decay.”¹²³

The Udāna Commentary, explains *tathāgata* as “self or soul” (*attā*).¹²⁴ This is where there are those who view the “saint’s state” (*tathāgata, bhāva*) as being active, conscious, stable, eternal, etc. Such a view is clearly rooted in eternalism, that is, the eternity of the soul in a personal sense.¹²⁵

6.8 THE TATHAGATA DOES NOT EXIST AFTER DEATH (*na hoti tathāgato param, marañā*). Under this heading, **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) lists grounds for views nos 51-57, of the annihilationists who uphold 7 grounds wherein the being is annihilated after death.¹²⁶ This view was probably amongst the ancient brahmins who knew the Upanisads. Since they mentioned that those who faithfully practised their religion, would be reborn to live forever in the brahma-worlds. There was no conception of any impersonal merging in union with Brahmā.

The Brhad-Āraṇyaka says that those who meditate on the truth with faith in the forest, are after death conducted to the brahma-worlds where they dwell forever without any return.¹²⁷ In fact, in the Buddha’s time, there was a common belief that what exists cannot cease to exist, such as in the Jain sūtras (*sati natthi vināso* “what is, does not perish”).¹²⁸

6.9 THE TATHAGATA BOTH EXISTS AND DOES NOT EXIST AFTER DEATH (*hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param, marañā*). Under this heading, **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) lists grounds for views nos 5-8, of the partial eternalists, who on 4 grounds proclaim the self and the world to be partly eternal and partly non-eternal.¹²⁹

This view was held by the Trairāsika Ājīvikas, who spoke of a state of “being and non-being” (*sad-asaṭ*), that is, where the after-death soul of a saint “both exists and does not exist.” However, we have no records of how they defended such a stand.¹³⁰ This group was closely associated with that of determinist heterodox teacher, Makkhali Gosāla.¹³¹

6.10 THE TATHAGATA NEITHER EXISTS NOR NOT EXIST AFTER DEATH (*n’eva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param, marañā*). Under this heading, **the Brahma,jāla Sutta** (D 1) lists grounds for views nos 13-16, of the endless hedgers, generally evade the issue on account of various fears (such as speaking falsehood or inability to give a proper answer).¹³² Dhammapāla identifies this view with the skeptics or endless hedgers (UA 340), since they were in the habit of stating all the prevalent views, but neither accepting them nor rejecting them.¹³³

6.11 THE TRUE PURPOSE OF THE HOLY LIFE. We have taken quite a long detour from our study of **the Cūla Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (M 63) [5.1]. The monk Māluṅkyā,putta demands that the Buddha answer the 10 questions. Otherwise, he would leave the order. The Buddha’s answer, or rather counter-question, is simple yet significant. He asks Māluṅkyā,putta whether the two of them have agreed to any pre-conditions for his renunciation, especially that the Buddha should answer the ten questions. Māluṅkyā,putta answers no, in which case, retorts the Buddha, no one is obliged to the other.

¹²³ Ground no 19-50 (the tathagata exists after death): D 1.75 f/1:30-33 = SD 25.2.

¹²⁴ UA 340,6 (Ce Ee) 340; UA:Be *satto*; UA:Se *sattā* ≠ Nm 64,20 (NmA 1:193,24).

¹²⁵ UA 340 further warns against falling into any of the 16 eternalist views of the post-mortem soul as being percipient, or the 8 views that such a soul is non-percipient, or the 8 views that it is neither percipient nor non-percipient. Cf Jayatilleke 1963:252 f.

¹²⁶ Ground no 51-57 (the annihilationists): D 1.84-91/1:34 f = SD 25.2.

¹²⁷ They would be guided the *brahman* (the divine realm) by a “mind-made person” (*puriṣo mānasaḥ*, BĀU 6.2.-15) or “a non-human person” (*puruṣo mānavaḥ*, Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4.15.5). See Jayatilleke 1963:248 f.

¹²⁸ Sūtra, kṛtāṅga, tr H Jacobi, *Jaina Sūtras*, pt 2, SBE (Sacred Books of the East), Oxford, 1895 45:343. See Jayatilleke 1963: 248 f.

¹²⁹ Ground no 5-8 (the partial eternalists): D 1.38-49/1:17-22 = SD 25.2.

¹³⁰ See Jayatilleke 1963:159, 249.

¹³¹ **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.18-19/1:53 f), SD 8.10.

¹³² Ground no 13-16 (the endless hedgers): D 1.61-65/1:24-27 = SD 25.2.

¹³³ Sañjaya Belaṭṭha,putta was the best known of these skeptics or endless hedgers: see **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.-30-31/1:58 f), SD 8.10. See Jayatilleke 1963:249 (§391).

The Buddha then expounds to Māluṅkyāputta the famous parable of the man wounded with a poisoned dart or arrow. If we are hurt by such a dart, we would not be wasting time asking about the description of the man who shot the dart (speculating about a creator or supreme being), of the kind of arrow or bow, from which the dart was shot (speculating about the nature of the world). The most urgent task is to get a dart-remover or a surgeon to remove the dart and heals us (understand and practise the Dharma).¹³⁴ The purpose of practising the Dharma is not for religious speculation or academic learning—clearly not the attaining of titles, fame, fortune or wealth—but the attaining of awakening in this life itself.

Even if scholars tell us that for centuries after the Buddha, the laity did not really meditate or practise Buddhism the way it is described in the early suttas, it does not mean that they are right. Official records and traditions that come down to us are often those of the dominant and well organized religious trends. Often these are more with the world than training them with the Dharma. Yet, there is a string undercurrent of Dharma practice and meditation that is never really lost, and such a current of fresh air is always there, if we care to breathe mindfully in the Dharma. There are the trees and there are the suttas; we only need to close our eyes in meditation, and when we open them, to train ourselves on the suttas so that we have the best means of conveying how the Dharma has touched us and change the lives of others, too.

7 The truth beyond words

7.1 DANGER OF SPECULATING. The Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta (M 72) is an important text because it is the locus classicus for teachings on the unanswered questions [5.1.1], specifically dealing with *the ten questions* in some detail, and the Buddha's answers to the wanderer Vaccha,gotta, who ends up going for refuge. The Sutta opens with the wanderer Vaccha,gotta asking the Buddha about the 10 points, but to every point, the Buddha replies that he does *not* hold such a view (§§1-12).

When Vaccha,gotta asks the Buddha why he has no view at all on any of them (§13), he replies that every one of them is a speculation that is

a wilderness of views, a twisting of views, a wriggling of views, a fetter of views; attended by pain, by conflict, by misery, by fever; not conducive to revulsion, nor to fading away [of lust], nor to cessation [of suffering], nor to inner peace, nor to superknowledge, nor to self-awakening, nor to nirvana. (M 72.14/1:485 f), SD 6.15

7.2 THE NATURE OF EXISTENCE. The key word in the four alternatives [2.2.1] is the verb “is” (*hoti*), a copula, that is, a linking or equating verb (such as “be” or “become”) that connects the subject with the complement of a sentence or as a predicate, eg, “The Buddha *is* awakened.” Often, the verb-to-be “is” (as it is called) is used to *equate* a subject with something *else*, eg “A cat *is* an animal.” All this may work in conventional language, reflecting a worldly view of things (that can be talked about). However, where a liberated state or being is concerned, it cannot be equated with anything else.

It is meaningless to even say, eg, “Nirvana *is*,”¹³⁵ because we could ask “is” *what*? Even then to predicate nirvana in this way is to actually view that it “exists” (*exists*) forever, which would be an eternalist view. To say nirvana “is” is the same as saying it “exists” (*atthi*): to exist, however, is to change and be impermanent.

Furthermore, existence is not a property of anything. A well known theistic argument (now not so much in vogue) is that God must *exist* because he is “a being than which no other could be greater.” What is the meaning of “greater” here? Greater in what respect? Greater than what? And so on and so forth.

Assuming that we have the concept of such a being, says **John Hospers**, the concept of the *existence* of such a being adds nothing to the concept of the being itself. What we conceive of is the same whether we conceive it as existing or not existing.¹³⁶ If I were to imagine a cow that flies, and imagine it as being real or *existing*, what I have imagined in the two cases is not different.

¹³⁴ M 63.4-5/1:428 f = SD 5.8.

¹³⁵ As eg in W Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, London, 1967:40.

¹³⁶ Hospers 1967:428 f, 1997:205 f.

“But not in the case of God,” a theist might argue: “He is a ‘necessary’ being.” If he does not actually exist, it is argued, our concept of God would be the concept of a being less great than of one who does exist, and it is the latter idea that we do have. Therefore, God exists, concludes the theist.

The obvious reply is, “We can’t define anything into existence.”¹³⁷ Let’s say we define a unicorn as a horse with horn on its forehead. We might even make movies about it, and sculpt statues of it. It still does not follow that there is such a thing as a unicorn (except of course in the imagination).

To say something exists is to say that it has some properties. For example, if it really has four legs, a tail, a horn and so on, then it does exist. But *existence* itself is not a property. As such, just because we, or even the most sacred of scriptures, say something exists does not mean that it does.

However, we can say define a Bodhisattva and describe him as a handsome young prince holding a fiery sword, sitting on a lion, and name him Mañjuśrī. We accept him as a symbolism of wisdom and an object of meditation. He exists in our imagination as a meditation figure to inspire is to seek wisdom. This is a skillful means that does not impose on others and cause various philosophical, social and historical problems like a God-idea.

7.3 THE FOUR NEGATIONS. Vaccha,gotta then asks whether any of this tetralemma¹³⁸ of being applies to a tathagata’s after-death state [5.1], that is, whether¹³⁹

a tathagata [4.2.1]	exists	after death, or	
a tathagata	does not exist	after death, or	
a tathagata	both exists and not exist	after death, or	
a tathagata	neither exists nor not exist	after death.	(M 72.13/1:485)

Vaccha,gotta is quite certain that one of these four alternatives or tetralemma must apply, that is, to say:¹⁴⁰

<i>Affirmation:</i>	x exists.	True
<i>Negation:</i>	x does not exist.	Contrary
<i>Double affirmation:</i>	x both exists and does not exist.	Contrary
<i>Double negation:</i>	x neither exists nor does not exist.	Contradictory

However, Vaccha,gotta is confused when the Buddha rejects all four alternatives, and declares his loss of confidence derived from their earlier discussion (§17). The Buddha then reassures him by switching to a different level of language—that of imageries—by employing the parables of an extinguished fire (§§18 f) and of the great ocean (§20).¹⁴¹

The simile of the extinguished fire is interesting from a philosophical viewpoint. **K N Jayatilleke**, in his *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, makes the following helpful observation:

¹³⁷ See **Sandaka S** (M 76) @ SD 35.7 (3.1.1); **Brahma,vihāra**, SD 38.5 (1.2.1).

¹³⁸ This is the Greek term for what is well known in Skt as *castuṣkoṭi* (the 4 points), which in canonical Pali is *catu,thāna* (the 4 grounds), found throughout the Canon: **D** 1:27, 59, 188-191, 2:68. **3**:135 f; **M** 1:157 f, 426-431, 484-486; **S** 2:222 f, **3**:116 f, 119, 215-218, 258-260, 262 f, **4**:286 f, 375-381, 384-402, **5**:418. 448; **A** 2:41, **4**:68 f, **5**:31, 186 f, 193 f, 196-198; **U** 67; **Nm** 1:64, 184, 208, 290, 293, 300, 306, 319, 323, 326, 331; **Pm** 1:123, 151, 153-156, 158; **Dhs** 195, 198, 202, 208, 216; **Vbh** 340; **Kvu** 506, 624 f; **Miln** 145.

¹³⁹ This tetralemma is found in many places in the Canon. In **Param,marāṇa S** (S 16.12/2:222 f) the Buddha mentions it to Mahā Kassapa; in **Anurādha S** (S 22.86/3:116-119). The tetralemma are mention by lemma in 4 suttas in Saṃyutta (S 24.15-18/3:215 f). The **Avyākata Saṃyutta** contains some suttas dealing with it (S 44.2-8/4:381-397): see S:B 1080 n165. For a philosophical discussion, see K N Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963:350 & Kügler 2003:100 f. For a detailed analysis of the tetralemma of the 10 points, see **Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63) @ SD 5.8 (2).

¹⁴⁰ Kalupahana 1992:48 f.

¹⁴¹ See Jayatilleke 1963:289-291 for further discussion.

The question is grammatically correct in its form and appears to have meaning owing to the logic of “go out.” A categorical and meaningful answer specifying the direction is possible to this question. Now our symbolism or linguistic usage permits us to extend the use of “go out” for such processes as fires or lights, but in such situations we would be committing a category mistake¹⁴² if we assume that the going out takes place in a specific direction. It therefore makes no sense to ask “in which direction has the [extinguished] fire gone?” and thereby asking a nonsensical question, to which no meaningful answer is possible. (Jayatilleke 1963:290)

7.4 CATEGORY MISTAKE. In the **Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72), Vaccha,gotta next asks the Buddha about the four alternatives [7.3] regarding the after-death state of a monk who is mentally liberated (whether he “arises,” or not, both or neither). The Buddha’s answer to each of them is that “It does not apply” (*na upeti*). When Vaccha,gotta pleads confusion, the Buddha consoles him and goes on to speak in parables.

First, the Buddha uses **the fire parable**. He begins by asking Vaccha,gotta whether he would know a fire if it is before him (he assents); then the Buddha tells him that a fire burns depending on some kind of fuel (that is, it depends on conditions). What now if that fire were extinguished: would it be proper to say that it has “gone to the east, or to the west, or to the north or to the south”? Vaccha,gotta answer, “It does not apply.”

This is of philosophical interest, as it concerns a **category mistake**. British philosopher **Gilbert Ryle** (1900-1976), in his classic *The Concept of Mind* (1949), gives this delightful anecdote to illustrate the meaning of a category mistake. *A foreign tourist is shown around all the colleges, libraries and other buildings of Oxford University. Then asks, “But where is the university?” His mistake is to think that the university is itself a building, such as the library and colleges, rather than the institution to which all these buildings belong.*¹⁴³

We can say that such thing as a person, a cat, a cloud or a bag has “gone somewhere,” but we cannot speak of an extinguished fire in this way. A fire burns dependent of its fuel, and when the fuel is gone or it is extinguished for any reason, does not fall into any category that can be predicated or described as coming or going.

It is the same for the after-death state of an arhat. Although we might *ask* about the state of a deceased arhat (or buddha), the question is meaningless. Such a question as meaningless as asking, “Why do blue unicorns have two horns?” Vaccha,gotta is confused by the Buddha’s rejection of each of the four alternatives because, to him, it would seem that one of them *must* be true, by necessity [7.2]. However, such predicates as “arise” or “reborn” simply do not apply to an arhat, and the deceased arhat is of a different category altogether, or better, is *uncategorizable*, as he has attained the unconditioned. Even in life, the state of a liberated saint is unfathomable like **the great ocean**, what more after death.¹⁴⁴

7.5 CONDITIONALITY. The same line of reasoning is used by the Buddha in the **(Avijjā) Paccaya Sutta 1** (S 12.35), where he explains the working of dependent arising [8.2.6], but a certain monk keep asking an “unfitting question” (*no kallo pañho*). The last link of the formula reads “with birth as condition, there arise decay and death...” The monk then asks, “What now, bhante, is decay-and-death, and for whom is there this decay-and-death?” (*katamaṃ nu kho bhante jarā, maraṇaṃ, kassa ca pan’idaṃ jarā, maraṇaṃ’ti*).

The Buddha replies:

“The question is wrongly put.

Bhikshu, whether one says,

‘*What now is decay-and-death, and for whom is there this decay-and-death?*’

or whether one says,

¹⁴² See Gilbert Ryle. “Categories” in *Logic and Language*, ed A G N Flew, 2nd ser 1953:75.

¹⁴³ See Baggini & Fosl 2010:80 f.

¹⁴⁴ M 72.16-20/1:486-488 = SD 6.15.

‘*Decay-and-death is one thing, the one for whom there is this decay-and-death is another*’—
both of them, bhikshu, are identical in meaning; they differ only in the phrasing.

If there is the view,

‘*The soul and the body are the same,*’ there is *no* living of the holy life;

and if there is the view,

‘*The soul is one thing, the body is another,*’ there is *no* living of the holy life.

Without going to either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by the middle, thus:

‘With birth as condition, there is decay-and-death.’” (S 12.35/2:61), SD 83.10

This is a template for the remaining 11 links of dependent arising. Each time the monk asks the same questions, the Buddha repeats the same answers. This is clearly a didactic device to reinforce the truth that there is nothing abiding, but there are only conditional processes.

As **Mark Siderits** notes, two things must be pointed here. First, by the second sentence the Buddha merely means to make explicit a presupposition involved in the original question. To ask, “*What* now is decay-and-death, and *for whom* is there this decay-and-death?” is to assume that there is a soul or self (*jīva*) which has old age and death as characteristics.

Second, if this point is accepted, then we must assume that the self is either identical with the body or different from the body. These positions were held, respectively, by the materialists and the Sāṃkhya schools of Indian philosophy. But on either assumption, according to the Buddha, the quest for nirvana becomes impossible.

If the self and the body are identical, then the self dies with the body and there is no karmic fruition or retribution in the next or subsequent lives. Thus, it becomes impossible to follow the path to nirvana over a succession of lifetimes, time span that is often required, according to Buddhism.

It is not clear why the Sāṃkhya position should be thought to make nirvana unattainable, but the Buddha might very well want to argue thus: If self and body are separate, then the self or soul would seem to be intrinsically unknowable.¹⁴⁵ In this case, the reason why suffering attaches to the self cannot be known, and thus its cure cannot be found.¹⁴⁶

7.6 THE MEANING OF “THE QUESTIONS IS WRONGLY PUT.” From the question “What now, bhante, is decay-and-death, and for whom is there this decay-and-death?” it seems natural to think that such terms as “old age” and “death” refer to qualities which are inherent in a substance or “being.” In fact, this is what the Buddha is rejecting.

We should not think of any discrete enduring entity, a “being,” who suffers old age and death. Instead, we should understand that there is only old age and death as *conditions* that arise dependent on other conditions, and which, together with these preceding conditions, constitute, without any residue, the “person” on which they are predicated.

Philosophically speaking, this is to claim that the notion of a “person” should be subsumed, not under the category of substance, but under the category of logical fiction.¹⁴⁷ In that case, the question, “*For whom* is there this decay-and-death?” is indeed “wrongly put”—for, it depends on a category mistake [7.4].

So why is the question “What now, bhante, is decay-and-death, and for whom is there this decay-and-death?” wrongly put? *Who* and *for whom* are at best social constructions; *what* we are is a healing deconstruction. Here, to ask *what* is to deal directly with the problem at hand.

7.6 THE KĀLAḶĀK’ĀRĀMA SUTTA (A 4.24) is instructive in showing us another way rightly looking at ourselves and the world: that there is *no agent* behind any event, that there is only *action*, but no actor. It is a short but remarkable discourse where the Buddha uses the four alternatives in an *epistemic* manner,

¹⁴⁵ This is the Sāṃkhya notion of *puruṣa* or self as pure subjectivity. The conclusion that *puruṣa* is intrinsically unknowable appears to have resulted from a line of thought not unlike the progressive refinement which the notion of self undergoes in Descartes, Locke and Berkeley. (Siderits’ n)

¹⁴⁶ See Siderits 1979:494 f.

¹⁴⁷ See **The person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b.

that is, showing how we know things. Here is its précis. The Buddha declares that, regarding the whole world of beings, “in terms of what is seen, heard, sensed,¹⁴⁸ cognized, attained, sought after and pondered over by the mind—all that do I know.”

(1) All this has been understood (*abbhaññāsīm*) by the Buddha. This is his “all-knowing,” that is, his full understanding of the “all,” a shorthand for the 6 internal sense-faculties, the 6 external sense-objects, their respective consciousness and related aspects.¹⁴⁹ “All that is known to the Tathagata [the Buddha], but the Tathagata takes no stand upon it.”¹⁵⁰ This means that he has no views about them: his is a direct experience of true reality.

(2) On the other hand, if he were to say he does *not* know all this, he would be speaking falsehood. The point is simple enough: to know but to claim ignorance is arrogant, foolish, or simply unawakened. Or, we could be forgetful or unmindful.

(3) Thirdly, if he were to claim that he *both* knows and does not have such knowledge, it would be false on his part, too. Clearly, here (at least), the Buddha is aware of what we today technically call the law of non-contradiction [2.2.1.2], that is, the two—to know and not to know—are contradictory statements and, as such, cannot both be true in the same sense. We (as unawakened beings) might know one thing, and not know another, at different times.

(4) Fourthly, if the Buddha were to declare that he *neither* knows *nor* not know all this as stated above, then it is a fault (*dosa*) on his part. Such a person, who does not take on stand, does on account of ignorance. As such, he could be doing so to avoid exposing his ignorance. Such deviousness or hedging [2.2.2] does not contribute to liberating knowledge,

Finally, the Buddha explains what is knowable as being only the activities of the sense-faculties, that is, seeing, hearing, sensing (smelling, tasting, touching) and cognizing. The Buddha does not *conceive* them, that is, he does not project them in anyway. He sees no gratification in any of them, nor sees them as having any abiding self or essence, that is, he does not conceive an agent.¹⁵¹

8 Truth, reality, realization

8.1 BEYOND SPECULATIVE VIEWS. The Vaccha,gotta Sutta (M 72) records how when Vaccha,gotta questions the Buddha on the points and the four alternatives [7.3], at first, he replies, “I do not hold this view” (*na kho aham... evam,diṭṭhi*). When Vaccha,gotta asks him why he does not have such views, he famously replies, such a view is

a wilderness of views, a twisting of views, a wriggling of views, a fetter of views; attended by pain, by conflict, by misery, by fever; not conducive to revulsion, nor to fading away [of lust],¹⁵² nor to cessation [of suffering],¹⁵³ nor to inner peace, nor to superknowledge, nor to self-awakening, nor to nirvana.¹⁵⁴ (M 72.14/1:485 f), SD 6.15

The Buddha goes on to declare that he has directly seen true reality as it really is, and all there is are the five aggregates, their arising and ending. As such, he is a fully liberated being, that is, no more in need of views or beliefs, any faith or religion, or salvation, He is indeed beyond all religion; he has attained nirvana.

8.2 TRUTH IS CREATED, REALITY DISCOVERED

8.2.1 The empiricist critique

¹⁴⁸ *Muta*, ie, what is tasted, smelt and touched.

¹⁴⁹ This is of course a basic def, based on **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15), SD 7.1.

¹⁵⁰ A 4.24.7/4:25 = SD 85.1.

¹⁵¹ A 4.24/4:24-26 = SD 85.1. For a philosophical analysis of **Kāḷak’ārāma S** (A 4.24), see Jayatilleke 1963:345 f; Kalupahana 1995:47-49.

¹⁵² “Fading away,” *virāga* also “dispassion”.

¹⁵³ “Cessation,” *nirodha*, ie, “cessation of suffering.”

¹⁵⁴ An almost identical statement is found in **Sabb’āsava S** (M 2.8/1:8), SD 30.3.

8.2.1.1 TRUTH AND REALITY. Any discussions on the four alternatives and the ten points relate to the nature of knowledge and understanding, or what is philosophically known as **epistemology**. Here, we need to understand, at least on a simple level, the difference between truth and reality.

Very simply put, truth is *created*, not discovered, while reality is discovered, not created. However, we could be mistaken and take what is unreal as real: this is called delusion (*moha*). Or we could create our reality and take it for real, consciously (such when playing a computer game) or unconsciously (such as in a hallucinatory state or in madness), but all this is *virtual reality*, a created or false reality.

Early Buddhism is clearly aware of all these, and as such stress on the test of personal or direct experience of true reality, and also on the truth or actuality of such experiences. In this sense, early Buddhism is *empiricist*.¹⁵⁵ Its noun, empiricism comes from the Greek word *empeiria*, meaning “experience,” and the heart of the empiricist critique is that any claim departing from human experience are unacceptable. Generally, this critique takes two forms: (1) a critique of meaning and intelligibility [8.2.1.2], and (2) a critique of truth [8.2.1.3].

8.2.1.2 MEANING AND INTELLIGIBILITY. One important learning strategy, using an empiricist discipline, is to (1) examine that a statement is only *meaningful* or *intelligible* if it is about, or somehow based on, human experience; and (2) to go on to carefully check that the related ideas, claims and words are actually meaningful. If it is not possible for us to experience it, then it is unintelligible. Take for example, these three statements:

- (1) The food was delicious.
- (2) Pluto is a planet.
- (3) There is one God, and He is a trinity.

Common statements like (1) is a matter of experience, since we have taken the food. Statement (2) is the result of studies by astronomers before the advance of more powerful telescopes and methods to determine as otherwise. The scientists of the past used available instruments and knowledge to come to what was within their understanding, which after all could be revised if necessary with better methods and understanding.

Claim (3) has little or no connection with experience, and is therefore meaningless. Much of such claims depend on how we precisely define “experience.” Could we, for example, *experience* “an infinite, eternal and transcendental being,” as some describe the God-idea? In fact, “meaning” can be tricky, as it has a number of different meanings! So what is the meaning of “meaning”?

In simple terms, we can define meaning as

- (1) our understanding and usage of words and body language,
- (2) related to our emotional state, such a desiring and social behaviour, or
- (3) how we refer to things and understand what is true or false.¹⁵⁶

An important understanding here is that *we* give meaning to things. We make *sense* of things, depending on how well we understand our sense-faculties (that is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touch, and thinking). In some important ways, our knowledge of ourselves and the world is becoming better with progress in human learning and technology. As long as we are open to such well-tested learning, we have a good chance of knowing ourselves and the world better.

8.2.1.3 CRITIQUE OF TRUTH. Some might argue that *all* of the above statements (1-3) are meaningful. The problem, however, is not really one of *meaning* but rather of testing. It is practically impossible for humans ever to produce a reliable test or method for working out whether statements like (3) are true or false.

¹⁵⁵ Early Buddhism is, of course, not merely *empiricist*. It also values truth that is useful, in the sense that it conduces to happiness and awakening, in which case, it is also *utilitarian* or *teleological* (purposeful, ie, for the sake of awakening). We cannot, and should not, pin early Buddhism down to only a single philosophical label, but philosophy can be a useful tool in helping us understand some of the deeper aspects of the Buddha’s teachings and to teach them to others.

¹⁵⁶ For details, see **The notion of *ditthi***, SD 40a.1 (13.3).

Since we have no way of confirming the truth of such statements, accepting or rejecting them is a matter of faith. If we accept this situation, then *any* belief, all *beliefs*, not just a particular one, should be acceptable! The problem is that without the test and truth of experience, anything goes. For this reason, wise and thinking people often reject such beliefs as nonsense and superstition.

On the other hand, much, if not most, of our experiences are not *rational* (based on reasoning or measured); they **tend** to be *affective*: we often act on impulse, guided by our feelings and emotions. The most significant of human actions are based on feeling: what we do in our past-time, falling in love, going shopping, looking for a job, or even reading this paper. We tend to do things that we *enjoy* or feel an attraction for. This is an important reason why all human learning and progress to this day has not been able to exterminate religion, superstition and delusion. Certainly, much progress has been made in exposing them for what they are, but they still have a powerful hold on most of us.¹⁵⁷

8.2.2 Reality. We create truth, or rather, we project our own truths into reality. But what is reality? For our current purposes, we will define **reality** as our mental experiences of things. We sense the external world through our five physical senses, but it is our minds that *makes* sense of them, gives meaning to them. We have an important idea here: when the sense-objects coincide with our mental experiences of them, they are *meaningful* to us. This means that we know what to *do* with them.

For example, now I am in my study. I can see a computer, shelves, books, a phone and so on. I can feel my chair and the fan blowing on me. I can hear some sounds of my neighbours and the road nearby. I can smell a gentle fragrance of sweet incense around me. I can feel my cat stroking my foot as I work. All this is *real* to me. However, if none of these are really there, and I imagined them, then I am hallucinating.¹⁵⁸

A key question now is where does my experiences come from, or how do I experience things? Answering the last question first: our experiences arise in connection with the physical senses when they are aware of their respective sense-objects. For example, my eyes are open and clear, and I can see the computer screen, and since I'm paying full attention to it, I can read what I am typing here. But this is only the beginning of what early Buddhism calls perception.

So we have the conjunction of sense-faculty, sense-object and appropriate attention (consciousness). In short, I *cognize* things through my consciousness. When these three meet in this way, feeling arises. In other words, I will like what I have typed on the screen, or I may not like it, or I simply ignore it. How I feel here depends on my past experiences, which allows me to *re-cognize* what I experience before me. If it relates to something *pleasant* I have experienced in the past, I will recognize it as pleasant. If it relates to something *unpleasant* in my past, I will perceive it as unpleasant. Otherwise, I will simply let all the words appear on the screen almost unconcerned, since I have nothing to relate them to in my past.¹⁵⁹

8.2.3 Is the external world real? In early Buddhism, the mind is the key sense-faculty because it is the faculty that actually makes sense of things, giving meaning to our experiences through cognition and perception. It is a sense-faculty in its own right because, on its own, it, too, it makes things up, such as during dreams. In fact, in the unawakened mind, it is always making things up as we experience things.

The external world is real all right: it is *there*, and still there even if we close our eyes, or fall asleep, or die. But no matter how much we think we can change or control it, we cannot really do anything with it philosophically or spiritually. As such, it is best left alone. Moreover, and more importantly, all (*sabba*) that there is or exist for us is our *six sense-faculties* and their respective *sense-objects*, that is, the internal senses and the external senses—together called “the twelve sense-bases” (*dvādas'āyatana*).¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ See Baggini & Fosl 2010:227-229 §6.3 Empiricist critique of metaphysics.

¹⁵⁸ See Hospers 1967:506-527, 1997:71-100.

¹⁵⁹ On perception, see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18.15-18/1:112), SD 6.14 & **Saññā** esp SD 17.4 (8.1). See also Analayo 2003:222-226.

¹⁶⁰ Cf the “18 elements” (*aṭṭhārasa dhātu*) with the respective sense-consciousness (*viññāṇa*): Vism 15.17-43/484-490.

This model of the twelve sense-bases is a synecdoche or shorthand for the conditionality (*hetu, paccaya*) that is everything within us and without.¹⁶¹ This is our real world, as it is created by us and we live in it. It is both physical (our body) as well as mental (or mind), but it is the mental aspects that affect us most and that we need to deal with every waking moment.¹⁶²

8.2.4 We create our own world. In an interesting manner of speaking, the purpose of being a Buddhist is to *discover the world*. But before we can do that, we need to know what it really is. In a sense, we discover our world by understanding how we *create* it ourselves. In **the (Samuday’atthaṅgama) Loka Sutta** (S 12.44), the Buddha gives a shorter version of dependent arising than the full 12-link one, and it begins with the six senses:

Dependent on the eye and forms , there arises	eye consciousness,
and the coming together of the three is	contact.
Dependent on contact, there arises	feeling.
Dependent on feeling there arises	craving.
Dependent on craving there arises	clinging.
Dependent on clinging, there arises	existence.
Dependent on becoming, there arises	birth.
Dependent on birth there will be	decay and death, grief, lamenting, suffering and despair.
— <u>This is the origin of the world.</u>	
Dependent on the ear and sounds , there arises	sound consciousness,
and the coming together of the three is	contact; etc....

The same is repeated of “nose and odours,” “tongue and tastes,” “body and impressions” and “mind and mind-objects.” (S 12.44/2:71-73).

This is the external physical world, which we cannot really change or need to. The real change must occur in the world *within*, and this is the world that we have created for ourselves. In very significant ways, it is our world within that actually dictates how we view the world outside. Understand the world within, we understand the world without, and so we are truly and fully liberated from suffering. We have awakened to true reality.

8.2.5 Discover the world. When we examine our world, what do we “see” (also hear, smell, taste, touch and cognize)? One thing we always see is change. In fact, without change, we experience nothing; everything becomes meaningless. To exist is to change. Change is real indeed. If we fail to see this, we fail to experience reality.

But what does seeing reality *do* to us? We see another characteristic of reality: it is never satisfactory. This is because it is impermanent. What is impermanent changes, alters and becomes other. We experience the world and we see things we like (we want it), or we see things we do not like (we reject it), or we simply ignore it (those we cannot relate to).

Every time we feel desire for something, we reinforce that desire. We tend to want it again the next time we notice it. Every time we dislike something, and say anger arises, we are likely to be angry again; we reinforce that aversion. Every time we ignore an event (impermanence) before us, we reinforce our ignorance. These are the most deeply rooted habits of our heart—they are called “latent tendencies” (*anusaya*).¹⁶³

When we understand impermanence, and that there is nothing that we can really cling to, we also realize that there is really *no* way we can control nature, much less the external world. We simply have to live with it. In fact, once we start learning to live with our world, the external world, too, takes its proper per-

¹⁶¹ The process of our internal conditionality is crystallized in the “dependent arising” (*paṭicca samuppāda*) model: see **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16.

¹⁶² See **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15), SD 7.1.

¹⁶³ See **Latent tendencies**, SD 31.34 & **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b.

spective and becomes beautiful and truthful to us. This is because we are *realizing* our world, we are making it *real*.

8.2.6 No entities, but processes. One of the key verses reflecting the early Buddhist attitude towards reality—true and virtual—is found in **the Nibbedhika Sutta** (A 6.63), which runs thus:

<i>Saṅkappa,rāgo purisassa kāmo n'ete kāmā yāni citrāni loke saṅkappa,rāgo purisassa kāmo tiṭṭhanti citrāni tath'eva loke</i>	The thought of passion is a person's sensuality: There is no sensuality in what is beautiful in the world. The thought of passion is a person's sensuality: What are attractively diverse ¹⁶⁴ in the world remain just as they are.
<i>ath'ettha dhīrā vinayanti chandan ti</i>	So here the wise remove desire (for them). ¹⁶⁵ (A 6.63.3b/3:411) = SD 6.11

Here, we can say that “**the all**” (*sabba*) of **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23)¹⁶⁶ includes the “sense-bases” (*āyatana*) but is more inclusive. We can also say that “the all” denotes “the sense-bases and sense-objects,” or that “the all” denotes “the eye, forms, eye consciousness, feeling, craving, etc.,” which is actually the dependent arising formula.¹⁶⁷

One of the key uses of the dependent arising formula is to show how our present life, even a thought-moment of our present life, occurs, thus:

Ignorance → volitional activities → consciousness → name-and-form → six sense-bases → contact → feeling → craving → clinging → existence → birth → decay and death.

The Irish poet, **James Joyce** (1882-1941), put this formula poetically, thus:

In the ignorance that implies impression that knits knowledge that finds the nameform that whets the wits that convey contacts that sweeten sensation that drives desire that adheres to the attachment that dogs death that bitches birth that entails the ensuance of existentiality.
(James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, NY: Viking Press, 1967:18)

Our lives begin in **ignorance**, and continue to be rooted in ignorance, as long as we do not cultivate our bodies and minds to fearlessly look at true reality. Otherwise, we blindly or deliriously or hopefully move into action like a helpless infant, seeking physical survival. These **volitional activities** ensure our survival in a hostile world, the realities of which encroach upon our **consciousness**: we *cognize* things, making some sense of them. As we become more conscious of the external world, we understand it as comprising of **name-and-form**: things seem to exist because we *name* them, and when we call their names, they seem assume some living *form* in our minds.

As we become more familiar with these names given to forms, we consciously or unconsciously notice that they are *sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts*—**the six sense-bases**. Through them, we reinforce our inner world of **contacts**, sense-stimuli. We evaluate each of these contacts or sense-experiences, depending mostly on how we have (or not) experienced them in the past: our **feeling** for them is *recognized* as whether we have experienced a similar stimulus in a pleasant way (then we *like* it), or an unpleasant way (then we *dislike* it), or have no experience of it (then we *ignore* it).

¹⁶⁴ “Wonderfully diverse,” *citra*, has a broad range of meanings: **1** (mfn) (i) bright, bright-coloured, decorated, many-coloured; extraordinary, wonderful; (ii) variegated, speckled; (iii) various, different, manifold. **2** (n) a kind of bird (the speckled cuckoo?). **3** (n) (i) something brilliant or diverse or extraordinary; (ii) a painting, a picture. See DP for details.

¹⁶⁵ This verse, which explains the previous prose sentence, “plays upon the double meaning of *kāma*, emphasizes that purification is to be achieved by mastering the defilement of sensuality, not by fleeing [from] sensually enticing objects.” (A:ÑB 1999:302 n34)

¹⁶⁶ **Sabba S** (S 35.23/4:15), SD 7.1.

¹⁶⁷ See **Dependent arising**, SD 5.16.

Every time we *desire* something, we reinforce our tendency to lust; every time we *dislike* something, we reinforce our tendency to hate; every time we *ignore* something unfamiliar, we reinforce our ignorance. These are the three unwholesome roots that lurk deep down in our unconscious as latent tendencies.¹⁶⁸ Either way—whether we habitually like or dislike something (both fuelled by ignorance)—we reinforce our **craving**. What we crave for, once we get it, we cling to it, and *become* what we cling to: all this define our **existence**. When we exist, we continue in our personality or being: in this life itself, we experience **birth** as hell-beings (if we are habitually violent), as pretas (if we are negatively addicted to things and habits), as animals (if we wallow in ignorance and rituals), as asuras (if we are materialistic and exploitative) and as devas (if we enjoy a momentary high of pleasure or satisfaction).¹⁶⁹ Our task should be at least to *remain* human, if not cultivate our minds for inner divinity.

We are only *born* with a human body, but our human mind—the capacity for wisdom and peace, for beauty and truth—develop through our associating with compassionate and wise people (such as parents, friends and teachers), but ultimately we are left on our own to evolve into emotionally independent individuals. Even then, the best of us, too, must face **decay and death**, and we must face them bravely, joyfully, fulfillingly, like a faithful worker receiving his worthy wages.¹⁷⁰

From all this, we learn that we are but processes. The moments of our lives pass on incessantly and inexorably, we are but creatures of our own past. Whether we are hollow beings or fulfilled individuals depends on how well we live in the present, facing it as it arises with unconditional mindfulness, love and wisdom. We will then notice we are all still evolving: in this sense, we live in impermanence with a purpose, that of ripening in wisdom and awakening to true reality.

As such, true Buddhist practitioners reject any idea of “essence” (an abiding self or eternal soul). In fact, any substance doctrine would simply crash under the questioning weight of empiricist and linguistic critiques today, even if Buddhism does not speak out loud enough. The old theories of substance stand on clay feet of metaphysical dogmas that cannot be observed. Without such observation and vision, so necessary to understanding reality, such ideas are fundamentally meaningless, useless, even harmful.¹⁷¹

9 Negation and emptiness

9.1 THE OCTADS AND EMPTINESS

9.1.1 A “ninth” alternative? The Buddha’s rejection of the four alternatives is an important aspect of his teaching on right view, which is ultimately “no view.” In the **Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72), we have seen the Buddha how the Buddha reject all of the alternatives that would describe an abiding soul or the after-death state of a saint [7]. There is no view to be held about such speculative matters.

We have also noted the four alternatives or tetralemma [2.2.1.1; 7.2]. Here, they are listed symbolically, in a simple logical way, together with their respective negations, totalling eight statements or views:

<u>Positive configuration</u>	<u>Negative configuration</u>
(1) p	(5) not (p)
(2) not-p	(6) not (not-p)
(3) both p and not-p	(7) not (both p and not-p)
(4) neither p nor not-p	(8) not (neither p nor not-p)
	(9) emptiness (<i>suññatā</i>) (?)

Philosophically speaking, we could add a *ninth* statement or view, that is, **emptiness** (*suññatā*). This is *the viewless view* of the eight possible arrays of the proposition p and its “inseparable contradistinc-

¹⁶⁸ See **Latent tendencies**, SD 31.34 & **The unconscious**, SD 17.8b.

¹⁶⁹ See (**Pañca**) **Gati S** (A 9.68/4:459), SD 2.20.

¹⁷⁰ Sāriputta famously says: “I delight not in death, nor I delight in life; | I shall cast aside this body fully aware and mindful. || I delight not in death, nor I delight in life; | I await my time as a servant his wages.” || (Tha 1002 f)

¹⁷¹ See further Baggini & Fosl 2010:244-246 §6.10 Pragmatist critique.

tions” (Skt *apoha*) [3.3]. This is simply a mental construct to help us envision an unconditioned state, so that, as far as thinking and logic goes, nirvana is possible. [4.2.3]

9.1.2 Absolutely no self/soul. But that’s all there is to it. The Buddha rejects such a philosophical technicality. There are those who suggest that the Buddha only teaches that *form, feelings, perception, mental formations and consciousness* are non-self; but he does not say that there is no self at all in man or anywhere else, *apart* from these five aggregates. This view is untenable for two reasons: firstly, according to the Buddha’s teaching, a being is composed *only* of the five aggregates, and nothing more. The second reason is that the Buddha denies categorically in several places, the existence of any *ātman* or abiding soul or eternal self within man or without, or anywhere else in the universe.

That there is no abiding entity or pervasive essence within or without the five aggregates is clear from the totality formula, which famously runs thus:

Therefore, bhikshus, any kind of **⟨form | feeling | perception | formations | consciousness⟩** whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all **⟨forms | feelings | perceptions | formations | consciousnesses⟩** should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

“This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”¹⁷² (S 22.59/3:66-68 = V 1:33 f) = SD 1.2

This comprehensive “classification” of the 5 aggregates is explained in detail in **the Vibhaṅga** and briefly in the *Visuddhi, magga*, thus:

- “**internal**” = physical sense-organs (or in oneself);
- “**external**” = physical sense-objects (in other people, things, etc);
- “**gross**” = that which impinges (physical internal and external senses, with touch = earth, wind, fire);
- “**subtle**” = that which does not impinge (mind, mind-objects, mind-consciousness, and water);
- “**inferior**” = unpleasant and unacceptable sense-experiences [sense-world existence];
- “**superior**” = pleasant and acceptable sense-experiences [form & formless existences];
- “**far**” = subtle objects (“difficult to penetrate”);
- “**near**” = gross objects (“easy to penetrate”). (Vbh 1-13; Vism 14.73/450 f; Abhs 6.7)¹⁷³

Paraphrased, this means that there is no abiding self or soul within our own body or outside of it (internal/external); whether experienced through the physical senses or as a mental state, nor in any of the four primary elements (gross/subtle); whether in our pleasant sense-experiences or our unpleasant ones, or in the sense-world or in the form and formless worlds (inferior/superior); whether distant/microscopic or nearby within normal sense-range (far/near).

9.2 A VERY SHORT HISTORY OF ZERO. The ancient debates and discussions over the four alternatives and emptiness [10.1.1] occurred in a rich time of intellectual turmoil in India. The idea of emptiness (*suñ-ñatā*) in due course allowed the Indian mathematicians to come up with ideas of **the zero**. Historically, there are three different types of zero: the “intuitive zero,” which means “nothing,” the “numeral zero,”

¹⁷² *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmi, na mēso attā ’ti.* This threefold formula is the contrary of “the 3 graspings” (*ti, vidha gāha*), that is, of view (*diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), of conceit (*māna*) (MA 2:111, 225): here applied to the 5 aggregates [17-21]. A brief version, “There can be no considering that (element) as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’” (*ahaṃ ti vā mamaṃ ti vā asmī ti vā*) is found in **Mahā Hatthi, padopama S** (M 28/1:184-191 §§6b-7, 11b-12, 16b-17, 21b-22). These 3 considerations represent respectively the 3 kinds of mental proliferation (*papañca*) of self-view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*) and of conceit (*māna*) (Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f). In **Anatta, lakkaṇa S** (S 22.59.-12-16/3:68), the formula is applied to the 5 aggregates & in **Parileyya S** (S 22.81/3:94-99) to the 4 primary elements. See also **Rāhula S** (A 4.177/2:164 f). See **Parileyya S**, SD 6.16 (5).

¹⁷³ See S 22.48/3:47. “Whether or not the details of the Vibhaṅga exposition are accepted as valid for the *nikāyas*, it seems clear that this formula is intended to indicate how each *khandha* is to be seen as a class of states, manifold in nature and displaying a considerable variety and also a certain hierarchy” (Gethin 1986:41).

used to represent numbers, and the “mathematical zero,” defined by the modern mathematicians. Many very ancient cultures, such as the Egyptians, Sumerians, and Mayans, knew of the “intuitive zero.”

The Sumerians were the first to develop a counting system to keep an account of their stock of goods, such as cattle, horses, and donkeys. Their system was *positional*; that is, they placed a particular symbol relative to others to denote its value. The Sumerian system was handed down to the Akkadians around 2500 BCE and then to the Babylonians in 2000 BCE. The Babylonians came up with a mark (but not the sign 0) to signify that a number was absent from a column. Only centuries later would the zero symbol as we know it appear.

The ancient Greek mathematicians who inherited their mathematical basics from the Egyptians did not have a name for zero, nor did have a placeholder for the zero as did the Babylonian. Such a symbol is not found even in their language.

It was **the ancient Indians** who first understood zero both as an idea and a symbol. One of the conceptual roots of zero lies in the philosophical and religious reflections on the four alternatives and their negation. Intellectually, the ancient Indians began to conceive an emptiness (*suñña*; Skt *śūnya*). In due course, they were able to conceive of zero as both a place-holder as well as a number [10.3].

The Indian history of the arithmetical zero goes back to Aryabhaṭa (476-550). According to mathematics historian, Georges Ifrah (1985), although Aryabhaṭa did not invent the use of zero, it was implicit in his works and calculations. Brahma, gupta (c 650 CE) was the first to formalize arithmetic operations using zero, represented by dots under numbers. These dots were referred to as *śūnya*, meaning “empty,” or as *kha*, meaning “place.” He laid down rules for reaching zero by addition and subtraction as well as the results of operations with zero. Then Bhaskara (12th century) improved upon Brahma, gupta’s work by showing that any number divided by zero was infinity.

It would still be a few centuries, however, before zero reached Europe. First, the great Arabian voyagers would bring the texts of Brahmagupta and his colleagues back from India along with spices and other exotic items. By 773, zero had reached Baghdad, and was developed in the Middle East by Arabian mathematicians who would base their numbers on the Indian system.

In the 9th century, Mohammed ibn-Musa al-Khowarizmi was the first to work on equations that equalled zero, or *algebra*, as came to be known. He introduced fast methods for multiplying and dividing numbers known as *algorithms*, named after him. Al-Khowarizmi called zero *sifr*, from which the English “cipher” is derived. By 879, zero was written almost in its modern form, as an oval, but smaller than the other numbers. With the conquest of Spain by the Moors, zero finally reached Europe. By the middle of the 12th century, translations of Al-Khowarizmi’s work had found their way to England.¹⁷⁴

9.3 EMPTINESS AND ZERO. Zero is often equated with “nothing,” but this is not a good analogy. Zero can be the absence of a quality, but it can also be a starting point, such as 0° on a temperature scale. In a mathematical system, zero is the *additive identity*. It is a number which can be added to any given number to give a sum equal to the given number. Symbolically, it is a number 0, such that $a + 0 = a$ (for any number a).

Zero is also the ending of a sequence or process, such as in clock number, where, properly speaking, after 24:59:59 comes 0:0:0. Hence, we can regard zero as the beginning and ending of all processes, of all formations. As such, 0 is the “middle point,” as it were, not so much “between” things, as not a part of either party. As a number, it is neither negative nor positive, as shown in this number series, where we can see that the zero comes midway between the positive and negative numbers thus:

-10 -9 -8 -7 -6 -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 **0** 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To say that a number is minus-zero or plus-zero makes no difference. It is therefore an indeterminate quantity in terms of plus and minus, but it is still a number, or more exactly, an *indeterminate* number. Hence, we cannot say that it is *not* a number. Nor can we say that it is *both* positive and negative at same

¹⁷⁴ See J Paul Moulton 2004; also <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/about/zero.jsp>; <http://www.brusselsjournal.com/node/4107>.

time because positive and negative are opposites, and cannot be attributed to the same number. Nor does it make sense to say that zero is *neither* positive *nor* negative, because this would be denying both qualities, and possibly refer to something else.

It also does not make sense to speak of something *other* than what is positive or negative. This means that we are referring to a zero that is “determinate,” and there is no such thing: for, it is indeterminate. As such, zero is a quantity that denies all the four alternatives. It is neither positive nor negative, nor both positive and negative, nor neither positive nor negative. It is indeterminate (in this case).

10 Conflicting truth-claims in religion

10.0 THREE KINDS OF CONFLICTING RELIGIOUS TRUTH-CLAIMS. Here we shall briefly survey the application of what we have discussed above—especially regarding the indeterminate or unanswerable questions—and apply them to a few interesting problems of religious claims. **John Hick** (1993) has identified 3 kinds of conflicts in religious truth-claims:

- (1) Conflict of historical truth-claims. [10.1]
- (2) Trans-historical issues. [10.2]
- (3) Conceptions of ultimate reality. [10.3]

10.1 CONFLICT OF HISTORICAL TRUTH-CLAIMS.

10.1.1 Historical example of Elijah (1 Kings 17-19:21; 2 Kings 1, 2). **Elijah** (fl 9th cent BCE), the Hebrew prophet was credited with saving the Yahweh religion from corruption by nature worship of Baal. Elijah proclaimed that there was no reality except the God of Israel, stressing monotheism to the people. Elijah’s conflict with the priests of Baal may be a valid conflict for the Jews and Christians. However, Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist or Confucianist scriptures are not concerned either to confirm or deny this: *it belongs to a different universe of discourse from their own*. This is also an example of a category mistake [7.4].

10.1.2 Inter-traditional conflicts of historical beliefs. Indeed, even when two religions share the same source of faith, each may view the source differently. Let’s take a few important examples:

Christ’s crucifixion

The Christians believe that Christ died on the cross.

The Muslims believe that he only appeared to die.

Mt Moriah sacrifice

The Jews believe it was Isaac whom Abraham was going to sacrifice (Heb 11:17).

The Muslims believe that it was his brother, Ishmael, who was nearly sacrificed on Mt Moriah.

The Pope problem

The Catholics and Protestants dispute as to whether Jesus appointed Peter as the head of his church and whether the popes are Peter’s successors in this office.

Sunni-Shia dispute

The Sunni and Shia Muslims dispute as to whether Muhammad appointed Ali as his successor in the leadership of the Muslim *ummah* (community).

10.2 TRANS-HISTORICAL ISSUES. By “tranhistorical,” Hick means that “which are not settleable, even in principle, by historical or other empirical evidence.” Some questions within this category are unanswered questions (“whether the universe is eternal”), while others are unanswerable (the state of a tathagata after death).

In trying to give an answer to “everything”—a sort of theory of everything—religion, sooner or later, contradict themselves, especially where they rely only on the word or language.¹⁷⁵ Hence, religion often has to resort to the “language” of faith, where what we believe is what we get. To prevent this

¹⁷⁵ On the problem of language, see **Language and discourse**, SD 26.11 esp (4.3); also **The Buddha’s silence**, SD 44.1.

unintuitively self-made trap, the Buddha declares certain issues to be “indeterminate” (*avyākata*), or simply unanswerable, in the sense that they are meaningless and not related to the spiritual life.

Significance of Buddha’s stand. Since “unanswered questions” are not relevant to spiritual liberation, they are left unanswered. Questions such as the origin of the universe, etc. may be answered one day. But it would still have no relevance to spiritual liberation. In this case, Hick makes an important remark:

...no scientific knowledge can in itself be religiously significant except in so far as the religions unwisely adopt dogmatic views, as they have some times done, on questions in astronomy, geology, astrophysics or any other of the special sciences. (Hick 1993:111)

Hick goes on to remark that the physical universe is “religiously ambiguous, in the sense that everything we know or can conceive of knowing about its physical structure and workings is capable of being construed both religiously and naturalistically.” (1993 id; my emphasis).

10.3 REBIRTH DOCTRINE AS AN UNDETERMINED ISSUE. Interestingly Hick proposes that the doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth be classified as an “undetermined issue” (that is, not necessary for salvation or liberation). The Buddha, of course, does not take this stand. He has given clear teachings on rebirth.

Its Buddhist clarity notwithstanding, the rebirth doctrine conflicts with traditional Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Bahai beliefs, and with contemporary Western naturalism. Thus taken on a global scale, non-Buddhist scholars and some modern Buddhists have to categorize rebirth as one of the undetermined issues. Does this then not constitute a new “Buddhism,” say “western Buddhist naturalism”? Of course, this is merely a label.

On the other hand, if we examine the Buddhist teachings a little more deeply, Hick will find more Buddhists agreeing with him than disagreeing. Let me here refer to an indisputable piece of scriptural evidence—what is popularly called “the parable of the handful of leaves”—given in **the Sīmsapā Sutta** (S 56.31):

On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Kosambī in a simsapa (*Dalbergia sisu*) grove. Then the Blessed One took up a few simsapa leaves in his hand and addressed the monks thus:

“What do you think, bhikshus, which is more numerous: these few simsapa leaves that I have taken up in my hand or those in the simsapā grove overhead?”

“Bhante, the simsapa leaves that the Blessed One has taken up in his hand are few, but those in the simsapa grove overhead are numerous.”

“So too, bhikshus, the things I have directly known but have not taught you are numerous, while the things I have taught you are few. And why, bhikshus, have I not taught those many things? Because they are unbeneficial, unconnected with the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to revulsion [with the world], to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana. Therefore I have not taught them.

And what have I taught?

I have taught: ‘This is suffering’;

I have taught: ‘This is the origin of suffering’;

I have taught: ‘This is the cessation of suffering’;

I have taught: ‘This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.’

And why, bhikshus, have I taught this? Because this is beneficial, connected with the fundamentals of the holy life, and leads to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana. Therefore I have taught them.

Therefore, bhikshus, make an effort to understand (these four noble truths).”

(S 56.31/5:438 f) = SD 21.7

This passage gives us a broad hint that the Buddha is at least near-omniscient. I venture to say that he probably knows all the answers to the unanswerable questions, but he is not telling. I can say this merrily

without fear or favour, without being labelled a sinner or a blasphemer. The point is that even if the Buddha were to explain them to us, would we be able to understand his explanation?

It is not that this last concept (omniscience) is alien to Buddhism (which indeed it is not), but more importantly that such a statement has nothing to do with salvation. It is a speculative statement, perhaps useful in promoting religious dialogue. To that extent it may be worthwhile to discuss it.

10.4 CONCEPTIONS OF ULTIMATE REALITY. It is difficult to find a common ground that all religions can fully agree on and without any reservation. The Buddhists reject the idea of a creator-God. On the other hand, to envision a “universal nirvana” towards which all beings move is to violate what is known within the Buddhist tradition.

Hick proposes the Buddhist term *śūnyatā*, “emptiness” (that is, something that transcends conceptualization), as the ultimate reality, the Real. This ultimate reality manifests itself in Buddhism in the doctrine of dependent arising [8.2.6]. Here, the dependent arising formula not only explains personality development but also rebirth.

By “birth” (*jāti*) is meant not only birth in the physiological sense, but all types of “generation.” Just as all the other factors of the dependent arising series must be understood as parallel, interdependent streams of processes running throughout our life, so birth, too, is a continuous process. In which case, “death”, too, is a continuous process, since they are interconnected.

10.5 UNIVERSALITY OF ŚŪNYATĀ. Let us humour Hick by regarding *śūnyatā* (P *suññatā*) as the ultimate reality, in itself inexperienceable and beyond the scope of human conceptuality (1993:114). But it can be experienced in a range of different ways made possible by the different spiritual disciplines and systems of religious thought:

There are Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Hindu and other theistic experiences of *śūnyatā* as a personal deity. There is the advaitic Hindu experience of *śūnyatā* as Brahman. And there is the Mahayana Buddhist experience of *śūnyatā* as the world-process, *pratitya-samutpada*. (1993:114)

Of course, this is not the only authentic mode of experience of the ultimate, but there is a range of it, Hick adds.

11 Conclusion: Wisdom and maturity beyond words

11.1 COMFORT ZONES AND GROWTH. In some significant ways, we may have to unlearn certain things we have taken for granted before we can really mature in spirituality. Notice over the years of our lives how we have changed our opinions about some events and issues in our lives. And we will continue to do so in the years to come. Even the opinions we now hold are likely to change, and often to change for the better.¹⁷⁶

However, such changes do not come easy. For most of us, Buddhists included, often feel comfortable with certain teaching or idea of Buddhism, we have been familiar with or inherited from an impressive book or media, or from some respected teacher. Despite the Buddha’s consistent and repeated reminders in the suttas not to be narrow-minded,¹⁷⁷ but to place the teaching above the teacher, we often are quick to reject anything we see as threatening our comfort zone, and we often feel strongly, even emotionally, connected with certain teachers.¹⁷⁸

If we are serious students of Buddhism, we would sooner or later realize that there are other voices than merely those of our teachers, or even our own. There are numerous other specialists and scholars of Buddhism who have their own ideas. And we also have to contend with our own social realities. In other

¹⁷⁶ See **The notion of *diṭṭhi***, SD 40a.1.

¹⁷⁷ The Buddha, eg, advises us against taking inflexible stand on a notion, thinking, “Only this is true, all else is false” (*idam eva saccaṃ mogham aññan’ti*) (M 136.9/3:210), SD 4.16. This is not an endorsement for our being “yes-men,” but that we should be able to allow space for others to express themselves and even consider the validity or usefulness of such views. We should definitely clear about the nature of good and bad, and be wise to our choice.

¹⁷⁸ See eg **The teacher or the teaching?** SD 3.14.

words, our view of Buddhism is sometimes challenged, sometimes obscured, sometimes confused, yet sometimes clarified and deepened by them.

11.2 WHERE WORDS FAIL, FEELING SEES. Early Buddhism seems mostly simple enough in its teachings and goals. But often enough we would encounter some difficult teachings. Often these are the teachings, if we are patient and open enough, that are likely to help us advance in our spiritual development.

There will be, there must be, moments in our Buddhist life when we simply cannot put our finger on the teaching. We seem to need to label it and file it away in our mental database. But the more worthwhile teachings and effective truths often defy being cut and dried into another opinion in our intellectual library.

French philosopher, **Amoury de Riencourt**, declares that “the great error of Western thought is to believe that it knows something about ultimate reality by giving it a name.”¹⁷⁹ A truth is mastered, it seems, when we know its name. We know “suffering,” for example, but it is only a word, it is not really the thing itself. We have not really suffering, or perhaps we have, but was never really mindful of it, or never really learned anything from it.

And meditation, for example, is today a “science” for the mind scientists who are able to measure what happens in the mind when we meditate. But what are they measuring? Electrical impulses, chemical changes, perhaps. Of course, there is a lot of useful things we can learn from such research and experiences. Yet, meditation remains a personal endeavour, like each of us must take our own meals and stay healthy.

Indeed, the deepest truth and greatest beauty of our lives must come from within ourselves. When are faced with the mystical depths of our being, chancing us with glimpses of self-knowledge, we will not be able to find the words for them, not right away anyway. We simply cannot seize such experiences or ideas like a hobby bug, pin it down on a setting-board, label it and store it away. Such experiences and ideas may change our lives forever.

German philosopher and theologian, **Rudolph Otto**, in the seminal work, *The Idea of the Holy*, explains the nature of such precious moments of self-knowing:

...we have to predicate them of a subject which they qualify, but which in its deeper essence is not, nor indeed can be, comprehended in them; which rather requires comprehension of a quite different kind. Yet, though it eludes the conceptual way of understanding, it must be in some way or other within our grasp, else absolutely nothing could be asserted of it. And even Mysticism, in speaking of it as [*to arreton*], the ineffable, does not really mean to imply that absolutely nothing can be asserted of the object of the religious consciousness; otherwise, Mysticism could exist only in unbroken silence, whereas what has generally been a characteristic of the mystics in their copious eloquence.

(*The Idea of the Holy* [tr John W Harvey, 1923], London: Oxford Univ Press, 1936:2)

11.3 FREE AS A BUTTERFLY. It would be a mark of great wisdom and maturity to frankly examine and admit our spiritual ignorance. With regards to these unanswered questions, there is a wide range of possibilities. We should not try to insist that everyone must affirm the position that most appeals to us. Rather, we should realize that it is not necessary for salvation or liberation to know whether, for example, the universe has a beginning and will have an end (as is common in western thought), or whether, on the contrary, it goes on in an endless series of cycles (as is generally supposed in eastern thought).

To regard such questions as soteriologically significant can only hinder the salvation or liberation process. These are at best language issues, problems with notice-boards, markers and maps. Despite that, we must each make our own journey.

I would like to close by giving John Hick the last say, with his philosophical humour:

¹⁷⁹ Amaury de Riencourt, *The Eye of Shiva: Eastern mysticism and science*, NY: William Morrow, 1981:90.

... it would be a mark of wisdom and maturity to accept our ignorance. We do not know, for example, the nature of the ultimate eschatological state—whether it is a state of what we now call ourselves, whether it is in what we know as space or in what we now know as time, and so on. The questions that we pose about it may be so utterly wide of the mark that any answers to them are worse than useless.

If a caterpillar could ask, concerning its own future post-chrysalis state, how many legs it will then have, how fast it will be able to walk, and what kind of leaves it will be able to eat, the Buddha would say, “Number of legs, speed of walking, eating of leaves, Vaccha, do not apply. Freed from denotation by caterpillar consciousness is the butterfly.”

(John Hick 1993:115. Reparaphrased)

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